Tweets on migrants during the election campaigns in the Community of Madrid

Tuits sobre la población migrante durante las elecciones políticas de la Comunidad de Madrid

Tweets sobre a população migrante durante as eleições políticas da Comunidade de Madrid

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In this paper we present research into narratives on immigrants and immigration, to identify cases of hate speech on the part of political parties against immigrants on Twitter during the 2019 and 2021 electoral campaigns in the Community of Madrid. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the results confirm the exponential increase by all parties in discussion on the issue of immigration and that the political agenda and public discourse is increasingly framed by hate speech towards unaccompanied minors and undocumented migrants.

KEYWORDS: Media agenda, Twitter, discourse analysis, immigration, electoral campaigns.

En este artículo presentamos la investigación realizada sobre el uso de narrativas migratorias y si hubo discursos de odio por los partidos políticos hacia la población migrante en Twitter en las campañas electorales de la Comunidad de Madrid en 2019 y 2021. Mediante un análisis crítico del discurso, los resultados confirman que se ha producido un incremento exponencial por parte de todos los partidos para hablar de inmigración. Los discursos de odio hacia los menores no acompañados y los migrantes en situación irregular promovidos por el partido Vox han marcado la agenda setting para hablar de inmigración.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Agenda mediática, Twitter, análisis del discurso, migración, campañas electorales.

Apresentamos a pesquisa realizada sobre o uso de narrativas migratórias e se houve discurso de ódio dos partidos políticos contra a população migrante no Twitter nas campanhas eleitorais da Comunidade de Madrid em 2019 e 2021. Através de uma análise crítica do discurso, os resultados confirmam que houve um aumento exponencial de todas as partes para falar sobre imigração. Os discursos de ódio contra menores desacompanhados e migrantes em situação irregular promovidos pelo partido Vox marcaram a pauta para falar sobre imigração.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Agenda midiática, Twitter, análise do discurso, imigração, campanhas eleitorais.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the narratives

In May 2016, the European Commission (EC) presented its "Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online", in agreement with four large information technology companies (Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube).

According to the latest evaluation from the European Commission on the impact of this code of conduct, in 2019 IT companies assessed on average 89% of flagged content within 24 hours, compared to 81% in 2018. The removal rate over these two years remained stable at approximately 70% of all flagged content (EC, 2019). This may be considered a logical consequence of the application of the Recommendation 20 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (1997), which defined hate speech as:

> All forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, immigrants and people of immigrant origin.

Narrative refers to the way and words used to discuss any subject; thus, in examining the narratives used when referring to immigration it is essential to determine if these violate the EU's Code of Conduct and, consequently, can be classified as anti-immigrant hate speech (Leurs et al., 2020).

Leader-Maynard and Benesch (2016) maintain that both the discourss of hate and the ideologies associated with them constitute a real danger with the risk of spilling over into crime and acts of terrorism. This is a well-known question, the paradox of tolerance, first enunciated by the Austrian philosopher Popper (2017) who, in the wake of the horrors of the Second World War in 1945, affirmed that we cannot tolerate intolerance, because to do so would ultimately undermine the very foundations of a pluralistic society.

Some of the most recent international studies into hate discourse, by Leader-Maynard and Benesch (2016) and Müller and Schwarz (2017, 2020), note the particular rhetoric of each media, its focus (general or a niche) and forms of expression, whether it is fact-based and expressed in sophisticated or popular language. Further, researchers have analyzed how the target of denigration is also stigmatized (sexual or gender identity, nationality, religious beliefs, etc.) and the environment or scenario where the intolerant discourse takes place. Finally, they note that a diachronic perspective is required to analyze how crude stereotypes are converted into narratives of aggression.

Social media platforms are among the principal venues of political debate and channels through which hate speech is introduced into public discourse (Velasco & Rodríguez-Alarcón, 2019).

Müller and Schwarz (2020) analyzed how in the United States, specifically during the primary elections of 2016, tweets by Donald Trump against the Muslim minority fueled a 32% increase in hate crimes, racist tweets and attacks on this community.

In another article, Müller and Schwarz (2017) concluded that the use of messages on Facebook and other social media platforms against refugees and asylum seekers produced a surge of hate crimes against these minorities in towns and cities across Germany. Specifically, there were over 700 direct attacks against refugees (assaults, arson, etc.) in over 3 000 incidents recorded in Germany between 2015 and 2017.

ANTI-IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES IN THE POLITICAL AGENDA AND IN THE MEDIA

Anti-immigrant narratives are those which encourage the rejection of the immigrant population and foreigners generally (Ekman, 2019). The rejection of an "exo-group", specifically immigrants, should be examined in light of the crucial role played by both traditional media outlets and social media (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2020). According to figures from the Center for Sociological Research (CIS in Spanish), immigration has always been at the forefront of the concerns of Spanish society. In September and October of 2006, in the midst

of the so-called "cayuco crisis", polls showed that immigration was considered the main problem in Spain, 59.2% and 49%, respectively (CIS, 2006). Between 2011 and 2018 the importance of the issue receded to 6.5% (CIS, 2011, 2018). However, by May 2019, coinciding with municipal and community elections in various parts of Spain, this percentage rose to 11%, reaching a peak of 15.6% in September 2019 (CIS, 2019).

However, immigration is a broad issue and much of the anti-immigrant discourse is aimed at specific groups (Levi et al., 2019). In Spain, it has been observed that discourse about immigration during election campaigns focuses primarily on immigration from Africa (Mendez & Cutillas, 2014), despite the fact that African immigrants account for only 22% of the total immigrant population in the country (INE, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021). In this way, the growing prominence of political parties with an explicitly anti-immigration message has clearly impacted the agenda setting (Anderson et al., 2020; Engl & Evrard, 2020; Nygaard, 2020), shifting debate and orienting narratives towards this issue.

Theoretical overview of anti-immigrant narratives

As opposed to the election of 2015, where there was relatively little debate or discussion of the question of immigration during the campaign (Alcántara-Pla & Ruiz-Sánchez, 2018), during the election campaigns of 2019 and 2021 in the Community of Madrid the issue featured prominently in political messaging and discourse. Until three decades ago, extremist, authoritarian and xenophobic parties had been relegated to the margins of the European political scenario, but since then these parties have grown to become one more element within the political landscape, comparable to other mainstream parties (Ferreira, 2019; Hainsworth, 2016). Within this context, Spain and Portugal largely remained a notable exception to these trends, without any parliamentary parties expressing an overtly racist or xenophobic position (Ferreira, 2019). One exception was Plataforma per-Catalunya (PxC), a party with an explicitly anti-immigration agenda which obtained representation at the local level in early 2000 (Casals, 2009). Thus, the rise to prominence of the party Vox in regional and national parliaments

represented a political earthquake which substantially transformed the political landscape and public discourse (Rinken, 2019).

Although far-right political parties vary from country to country on the issues they chose to focus on, these are all in some way related or connected to a central omnibus issue: immigration (Castro & Mo Groba, 2020). Immigration lies embedded within all other political issues: overcrowding and collapse of public education, public health services, housing, public spending, safety and criminality, with the addition of an overarching and supposed "clash of civilizations", arising from inherently incompatible or conflicting values, cultures and lifestyles (Hainsworth, 2008; Huntington, 1996). The issue of immigration is used by far-right political parties to justify their vision of a nativist economic policy (Eatwell, 2000), where social services and benefits provided by the State are only sustainable if the beneficiaries are native inhabitants rather than foreign immigrants.

The question of immigration suddenly arose as a critical political issue in July and August of 2018, just six months before the elections in Andalusia of December 2nd in which, for the first time, Vox obtained parliamentary representation (subsequently ratified in the General Elections of April 28th, 2019; in the European, regional and municipal elections of May 26th, 2019, and again in the repeat general elections of November 10th, 2019).

The anti-immigration rhetoric of Vox explains the success of the party in areas with intensive agriculture which, for years, had been "notorious for the deterioration of relations between segments of the local population and migrant workers" (Rinken, 2019, p. 73). However, real conflicts are not necessary for extremist parties to appeal to the fear of immigration since they need only to stoke fears of future conflicts (Castro & Mo Gobra, 2020; Golder, 2003; Mols & Jetten, 2016).

The political parties taking part in the debate about immigration during the 2021 elections were the Partido Popular (PP), Ciudadanos (CS), the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Vox, PODEMOS and Más País. As shall be discussed below in the analysis of the results of the research, Vox is the principal exponent of reactive discourse, targeting the immigrant population with an aggressively anti-immigrant narrative, while all other parties took a proactive approach within a

narrative which was not anti-immigration. In fact, the PSOE also made use of reactive discourse, but here in reaction to the discourse of Vox.

Of course, we do not mean to suggest that immigration was not a political topic prior to the appearance of Vox; but rather that Vox redirected attention to this issue, reformulating the terms in which it was discussed. Research has shown how far-right parties do not introduce new political themes but rather weaponize existing issues, denouncing establishment parties for failing to address real problems, in this case, immigration (Zúquete, 2017). By monopolizing an existing theme and reformulating it as new, extremist parties can generate among the electorate a feeling that they are the party which can most effectively address it (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007). In this scenario, immigration becomes the scapegoat for any number of problems, enabling a virulent and belligerent discourse against both immigrants and government immigration policy (Dunaway et al., 2010; Mudde, 2017). Thus, messages posted during the campaign period, amplified by traditional media and reverberating socially, are able to permeate deeply into society.

ETHICS OF MIGRATION

The complexity of the phenomenon of mass migration invites closer scrutiny, even in terms of the ethical language used: referring to the "phenomenon of immigration" rather than the "problem of immigration". This underscores the polarization of the perception of immigrants, seen, on one hand, as a source of cheap labor, unfortunate but necessary, as well as a means to address the problem of low demographic growth; and, on the other hand, as an opportunity for mutual cultural enrichment (Ruiz Echeondo et al., 2001).

Occasionally, the realities of immigration are disguised in order to not reinforce negative stereotypes. For example, the nationality of an immigrant involved in a crime may be omitted from reporting, either due to a lack of space or time for contextualization or as a simple precaution to avoid contributing to the common association in the public mind between immigration and crime.

The question of mass migration, and immigration specifically, is neither trivial nor inconsequential, but rather a significant and growing

reality that will impact everyone (Llorent-Bedmar, 2012). But this is not new. A 2006 United Nations report estimated that there are 191 million immigrants in the world, of whom 64 million are in Europe (United Nations, 2006). Fifteen years later, the UN International Organization for Migration (2021) put this figure at 281 million migrants worldwide. In the five years leading up to the pandemic, Spain saw consistent population growth, primarily due to immigration. According to figures from the National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE] in Spanish), immigrants account for 11% of the total population in Spain (5 407 822) (INE, 2021).

Evidently, contemporary societies are faced with a challenge in how to manage this situation in terms of sheer numbers, but there is also the issue of multiculturalism, the need to learn to live with the "Other". This is inevitably a moral question leading to the notion of interpersonal encounter. Thus, the adage "nothing human is alien to me" gains renewed importance. We are all, by our very nature, migrants; we may be so in the literal sense, having left our native land with aspiration to build a better life elsewhere, or we may do so in the future, an increasingly probable future in this ever-changing world (Bauman, 2002). Within the paradigm of the "performance society" and the "burnout society", immigrants and refugees are perceived as a burden (Han, 2017). This demands a deeper understanding of ourselves in this face of new realities, a broader vision of "we" and inverting the Cartesian maxim to affirm "I am, therefore I think".

In line with the Kantian notion of categorical imperative, we must view the "Other", never as a means but as ends in themselves; this "Other"', beyond mere numbers, has a human face (Levinas, 1961). The alternative is to objectify others, reduce them to objects, instruments, convenient scapegoats in moments of tension or violence (Girard, 1986).

Since the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015, political tensions have become more acute. The result has been a "makeshift measures and more concerned with securing the borders of the Union than protecting the rights of immigrants and refugees" (Park, 2015). Within this political context, there is an increasingly prevalent discourse of hate, portraying the Other as a danger and a threat to national identity (Alberdi, 2019);

in some cases, these discourses and narratives have become accepted across the social media landscape (Kreis, 2017), going viral in the post-truth context. To paraphrase Nietzsche, facts have succumbed to interpretation, and a cultural battle is being waged to construct narratives, increasingly weak and hazy (Martín Barbero, 2008), riven with emotivism and sentimentality detached from fact (Luri, 2021) and overcoming reason itself.

Finally, from this ethical perspective, we would like to note an aspect which is often overlooked: the right not to emigrate. As we shall see, public discussion of this issue generally turns on the legal status of migrants, on economic questions with a utilitarian perspective (cheap labor, saving the pension system, etc.); or even on moral terms, referring to strategies for fostering, accompaniment and integration while preserving one's cultural identity in a pluralistic and generally liberal democratic society.

But something is missing from the debate. There can be no ethical discussion of migration without considering a fundamental, a prior question; namely, how to create the conditions where no human being is forced to leave their home if they do not wish to do so. This is, in effect, a moral presumption and a call to action. The responsibilities of states and policies on immigration must go beyond national frontiers and reach to places and circumstances where migration is forced. This aspect of migration must form a part of public narratives and debates on immigration.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Our research focused on the discourses of the main political parties on the issue of immigration during the 2019 and 2021 electoral campaigns in the Community of Madrid (CAM), making a comparative analysis of the two periods. The necessary data was collected from the Twitter posts of the main parties during both electoral periods (from May 8th to 24th, 2019; and April 18th to May 4th, 2021). The social media accounts of the parties likely to win parliamentary representation, according to opinion polls, were the following: the party account at the Community level, the national party account, the head of the electoral list of each party and the president of each party.

During the course of the 14-day electoral campaign, we analyzed the Twitter postings according to the framework provided by the classic study by Zapata-Barrero (2009), identifying two types of discourse paradigms referring to immigration: reactive, opposing the entire phenomenon of migration and seeking to restore a supposed historical cultural homogeneity; and the proactive, embracing the notion of multiculturalism, accepting immigration as an irreversible historical process and regarding it positively.

Within reactive discourse, two types of narratives can be identified: firstly, the appeal to the interests of natives in opposition to those of immigrants, emphasizing the possibility for conflict between them; and secondly, the appeal to immutable cultural values of the native population and the risk of social disintegration caused by the presence of alien immigrants (Prieto-Andrés & Fernández-Romero, 2020).

Proactive discourse also incorporates two types of narratives: that which appeals to notions of inclusion and a future society where immigrants are integrated into local communities as full-fledged citizens and, secondly, a discourse centered on the recognition of difference without the need for assimilation but emphasizing the need for equal rights for all.

Once all the tweets posted during the 2019 and 2021 electoral campaigns were collected, they were subjected to a critical discourse analysis (Veeramoothoo, 2020), classifying each tweet according to the type of rhetoric.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

During the 2019 electoral campaign in the Community of Madrid, there were 26 reactive tweets and five proactive tweets referring to immigration and immigrants by the six parties represented in parliament.

In 2019, discussion on the issue of immigration during the electoral campaign, although at the local or regional level, was not particularly salient. During the 14 days of the campaign, only one party, Vox, posted more than one tweet per day on the subject of immigrants and immigration, all reactive in nature.

TABLE 1

2019 CAMPAIGN

Party	Reactive tweets	Proactive tweets	Total number of tweets
Ciudadanos	3	0	3
Más Madrid	0	1	1
Partido Popular	6	0	6
Partido Socialista Obrero Español	1	1	2
Podemos	0	3	3
Vox	16	0	16
Total	26	5	31

Source: The authors.

Comparing these figures to those of the 2021 campaign, there was a notable increase in the number of posts referring to immigration. Two important facts can be identified: firstly, both CS and the PP abandoned their reactive discourse, whereas Vox did not. Secondly, according to the agenda-setting theory referred to in the introduction, we see how Vox has managed to set the agenda when speaking of the issue of immigration. All other parties have reacted in their posts, which has obliged us to introduce the variable *reaction tweets*, referring to tweets which are a response to those of Vox.

TABLE 2

2021 CAMPAIGN

Party	Reactive tweets	Reaction tweets	Proactive tweets	Total number of tweets
Ciudadanos	0	9	3	12
Más País	0	13	12	25
Partido Popular	0	5	7	12
Partido Socialista Obrero Español	0	81	36	117
Podemos	0	52	29	81
Vox	223	1	0	224
Total	223	161	87	471

Source: The authors.

In total numbers, tweets on immigration increased from 31 in 2019 to 471 in 2021, an increment of 1 419%. A detailed analysis of the data for each party shows a relative increase for all parties on this issue.

However, this explosive growth across all political parties must be viewed in terms of reactive tweets. It can be seen that the question of immigration in the 2021 election campaign was marked by the rhetoric of Vox itself rather than proactive or reactive tweets per se. The PP posted two tweets that can be classified as proactive, while the posts of all the other parties, with the exception of Vox, were more frequently reactions than proactive. The PSOE posted more than twice as many tweets in reaction to Vox (81) than proactive tweets about immigration (36). If we discard the reaction tweets in our comparison between the 2019 and 2021 campaigns, a very different picture emerges.

TABLE 3
COMPARISON 2019 AND 2021 WITHOUT REACTION TWEETS

Party	Reactive tweets 2019	Reactive tweets 2021	Proactive tweets 2019	Proactive tweets 2021
Ciudadanos	3	0	0	3
Más País	0	0	1	12
Partido Popular	6	0	0	7
Partido Socialista Obrero Español	1	0	1	36
Podemos	0	0	3	29
Vox	16	223	0	0
Total	26	223	5	87

Source: The authors.

The data shows significant changes in the proactive and reactive trends of party discourse. In the case of the PP and CS, both parties modified their discourses from reactive to proactive in 2021. The number of tweets posted by the PSOE rose from two in 2019 (one proactive and one reactive) to 36 proactive tweets, more than any other party in 2021. Más País and Podemos maintained their proactive

narrative of immigration, increasing the number of posts in 2021. Similarly, although with a reactive narrative, Vox increased its number of posts, becoming the most vocal party on the issue: from 16 in 2019 to 223 in 2021. However, growth in total numbers is lower if we discard reaction tweets posted in response to those of Vox. Thus, the political parties most engaged in the issue of immigration in the 2021 campaign should be interpreted through the frame offered by the theory of agenda setting. This explains how Vox managed to frame the terms of the debate on immigration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data presented above, an initial observation can be made regarding agenda setting on the part of Vox. This party has largely guided the discussion on immigration and established the terms in which it is debated. The other parties have reacted, to greater or lesser degree, to Vox posts which have thus successfully placed immigration firmly on the political agenda, generating greater discussion on this issue. The practice of introducing an issue and presenting it as a dire and pressing problem for the community is common among all populist political parties (Miller et al., 2020). But it is not merely setting the agenda, determining what issues get spoken of, what is more important, and most dangerous, is how Vox has been able to frame the debate on immigration on its own terms (Ferreira, 2019).

It is important to underscore another consequence: the acceptance of the xenophobic and racist terms and parameters in which public debate takes place and a normalization of hate speech as has been denounced by numerous organizations, including porCausa, CEAR, Cruz Roja, SOS Racismo, Foro de Curas de Madrid, Mesa por la Hospitalidad de la Arquidiócesis de Madrid, etc. As the data provided shows, this discourse has become both more common and more aggressive.

In terms of the theory of the Overton window (Pettigrew, 2021), the debate now takes place on terms which were almost unimaginable just a few years ago (Paul, 2021). Thus, during the campaign, the protection of immigrant children has been cast into doubt (in a Vox election poster) and the same party even raised the possibility of deporting a Spanish

citizen on the electoral lists of Podemos, Serigne Mbayé. On March 30th, 2021, Vox's official Instagram account reposted an article from the newspaper *ABC* reporting that Podemos had included Serigne Mbayé in their electoral list. The Vox post included the text "we'll deport him". To question the right of a Spanish citizen to live freely within Spain is clearly unconstitutional; nevertheless, Vox has moved the Overton window to the point where this is now within the public debate (Fernández Suárez, 2021).

Furthermore, the party has persuaded a sizable part of the population that hate speech denigrating and criminalizing immigrants is now an acceptable part of public discourse (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2021). It is not enough to react with indignation in the face of hate speech, as we have seen in the data from the 2021 campaign above. It is necessary for all other parties to take a proactive action to move the Overton window back to within constitutional bounds. There is a real risk that the hate speech by political parties, amplified by the media, will seep into the public mind, fueling increasingly racist and xenophobic attitudes and behavior (DellaPosta, 2020).

Additionally, there was a notable change in the use of reactive rhetoric between 2019 and 2021. While in 2019, CS, PP, PSOE and Vox all posted reactive tweets on immigration, in 2021 this space was occupied exclusively by Vox. Reactive discourse about immigration is now solely the province of a single party, which is not to suggest that the other parties will implement reactive policies in the future on immigration, but that aggressively anti-immigrant discourse and hate speech is concentrated in a single party. This is highly significant and appears to confirm the theories about the phenomenon of extremist, right-wing populism. These parties benefit enormously by positioning themselves as the only party able to provide real solutions to a problem other parties ignore (Mols & Jetten, 2016).

To conclude, we see how the reactive rhetoric of Vox on immigration has forced the other parties to engage more on this issue than in 2019, when Vox did not provoke reactions to its posts. However, it is important to note the growing debate on immigration is largely the result of reactions by other parties to the discourse of Vox, although there was an increase in proactive posts by all other parties.

It is essential that the terms of the debate on immigration in the future move away from aggressive discourse and hate speech, moving the Overton window to allow a more reasoned and thoughtful debate on this complex issue, avoiding the objectification of immigrants and, above all, safeguarding the dignity of all human beings.

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