

7 Spanish far-right and environmental disinformation

VOX's obstructionist discourse on the climate crisis on Twitter

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Introduction

The effects of human action on the planet have caused undeniable climate change and unprecedented global warming, according to the report published in 2022 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is a part of the United Nations.

This is a matter of great concern to 74.7% of the Spanish population, as shown by the Spanish Sociological Research Centre (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas) barometer of February 2023. It is also one of the main concerns among European citizens (Eurobarometer, 2023).

This social concern about climate change has been paralleled by significant media interest in the environment since the beginning of the 21st century, with a particular impact in the media by the Fridays for Future ecological movement starting in 2018 (Amondarain et al., 2022). In this regard, Rivas-de-Roca (2020) points out that this movement incorporates some elements of cyberpolitics and utilises digital tools like Twitter for information and communication, surpassing traditional media (Vicente Torrico & González Puente, 2022).

Furthermore, there has been a considerable increase in concern about misinformation in recent years, as evidenced by the growing literature on this topic (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Thomson et al., 2022). Specifically, there is a rhetorical adversity surrounding climate change, with a prevalence of misinformation (Lewandowsky, 2020).

This article will analyse the environmental discourse of the political party VOX on Twitter, with a specific focus on obstructionist approaches to the climate crisis—they do not deny climate change but oppose climate action (Almiron & Moreno, 2022)—which are common among far-right parties globally (D'Angelo, 2019). To accomplish this, firstly, a theoretical framework will be presented that addresses the rise of misinformation surrounding climate

change and subsequently reflects on the disinformation discourse of the main representative of the far-right in Spain. Next, the objectives of the study will be introduced, along with the methodology used to analyse the tweets of VOX and its leaders on Twitter. Lastly, after explaining the findings, the main conclusions of the research will be presented.

Theoretical framework

From disinformation to climate change obstructionism

The democratisation of information on the Internet has not only enabled users to interact and share information, but has also had some negative consequences, such as the proliferation of disinformation on social media. This has become one of the main dangers to present-day democracies (Bennet & Livingston, 2018), casting doubt on the credibility of key sources of information (Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2020).

In this regard, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of misinformation and disinformation, as pointed out by Hameleers (2020). The former refers to the spread of false or erroneous information, which may have been transmitted inadvertently or out of ignorance. Disinformation, on the other hand, entails the intentional dissemination of misleading, manipulated, or decontextualised content with the aim of achieving certain objectives, frequently of a political nature.

Since the 2016 US presidential elections and the Brexit referendum, there has been a significant amount of scholarly research on disinformation, as highlighted by Kucharski (2016), who has focused on the effects of such discourse on the Internet. The virality of certain messages has led to the rapid spread of false content. According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), disinformation spreads six times faster than truth on the Internet.

Part of the scientific literature in recent years has focused on how disinformation discourses have challenged science (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic, there was a surge in research specifically addressing the spread of false information related to this topic, which was even termed an “infodemic” (Zarocostas, 2020).

However, it is not only public health that has been of interest in the study of scientific disinformation. The climate crisis has also received special attention in recent years in studies on disinformation (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020). Disinformation stances against climate change are often motivated by pre-existing beliefs but also by political polarisation (Levy et al., 2021). In this regard, disinformation and climate change obstructionist discourses can be found on the Internet.

According to Lewandowsky (2020), there is high polarisation, especially in the United States, regarding climate change. Opposition to climate science relies

on scepticism and the politicisation of this issue, with arguments that are often inconsistent, as highlighted by the same author.

In recent times, some authors have preferred to use the term “climate obstructionism” (McKie, 2021; Moreno Olmeda, 2022; Moreno & Thornton, 2022) instead of “climate denialism.” Almiron and Moreno (2022) argue that the term “denialism” is not appropriate to define those who obstruct or do not support climate action. These authors claim that obstructionists do not deny science but rather oppose climate policies. They also indicate that this concept can be polarising and does not fully reflect the climate countermovement. In another study, Moreno Olmeda (2022) asserts that these actors aim at “creating and disseminating misinformation about climate science and climate change in general” (2022, p. 121).

According to the Climate Social Science Network (2021), obstruction against climate change has the following objectives:

- 1) Maintain or transform the public agenda so that the desired framing is accepted as the common sense in that particular area, and assure that public opinion does not support climate action;
- 2) Shape the media agenda to promote particular perspectives that cast doubt on actions to address climate change; and
- 3) Influence the political process to select policies that do not support climate action.

This study will precisely focus on the dissemination of climate obstructionist discourse, as mentioned earlier, by right-wing political actors.

The disinformation discourse of the far-right and its relation to climate action

In a context of disinformation and polarisation like the current one, there is a rise in academic studies that focus on the spread of disinformation discourses by the far-right and radical right (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Hameleers, 2020). Bennet and Livingston highlight that this is not a new reality, nor exclusive to other political ideologies, but it is particularly common in these types of radical parties and movements.

While there is surely some degree of truth-stretching running across the political spectrum, it appears particularly concentrated on the authoritarian right, where liberal democratic values present growing challenges to movement values of ethnic nationalism and the restoration of mythical cultural traditions.

(Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p. 125)

The rhetoric of radical right-wing populist parties is based on anti-elitism and messages against certain minorities, such as migrants and Muslims (Muddle,

2007). In this regard, social media platforms provide an opportunity for these movements to propagate their discourse (Darius & Stephany, 2022) without the filters of traditional media.

VOX is the leading radical right-wing party in Spain. Although it was founded in 2013, it only managed to gain representation in the Spanish Congress of Deputies in 2019. One of the elements that has fuelled VOX's success has been Catalan independence (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020). VOX is currently the third-largest political force in Spain, with 12.39% of the votes in the 2023 General Elections¹. The party has also played a key role in the constitution of local and regional governments in Spain in the 2023 elections². Since the VOX party became the third political force in Spain in 2019, there have been numerous investigations that have focused on their discourse on social media platforms (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020; Castro Martínez & Díaz Morilla, 2021; Rebollo Bueno, 2022), as well as their relationship with disinformation (Hernández Conde & Fernández García, 2019; Simón Astudillo & Santana Chaves, 2022; Sánchez-Castillo et al., 2023).

In an analysis by Simón Astudillo and Santana Chaves (2022) of the Twitter posts by Santiago Abascal, the leader of VOX, and Jair Bolsonaro, the former president of Brazil, it was concluded that Abascal used negative emotions such as anger and disgust in his tweets related to disinformation messages.

This article will focus on the propagation of obstructionist discourses by VOX on Twitter. There are already studies that corroborate the link between the far-right and the spread of disinformation about climate change (Hultman et al., 2019; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). Right-wing populist parties in Europe are indeed opposed to climate action, as reflected in a study by Schaller and Carius (2019), which increases the interest in analysing the promotion of these ideas by the Spanish political party VOX.

In this regard, Moreno and Thornton (2022) have already pointed out that the Spanish far-right political party VOX has a discourse that opposes climate action, with nationalist and polarising elements. These authors highlight the characteristics of their discourse:

In the case of the amendment to the climate change law presented by VOX, there are frames of denial of the scientific consensus on climate change, rejection of scientific projections, and criticism of climate science, without the frame of outright denial of the existence of climate change.

(Moreno & Thornton, 2022, p. 36)

Their work focused on analysing the complete amendment to the Climate Change and Energy Transition Bill presented by VOX in the Spanish Parliament. In this chapter, the aim is to broaden the point of view and study their obstructionist discourse on Twitter. In addition, we do not only want to study the case of the

Climate Change Law, but also the references made to environmental and climate issues.

This research aims to study whether the discourse of the Spanish far-right party VOX promotes disinformation on climate change. For this purpose, we will examine, firstly, whether the Twitter messages of accounts linked to VOX promote climate obstructionism. Secondly, we will analyse the type of obstructionist discourse they promote and its characteristics. Finally, we will explore whether VOX uses any information sources to support its discourse, whether through mentions, links, or multimedia content.

Methodology

To fulfil the objectives, messages published by VOX between September 2022 and February 2023 in a convenient period that ensures a representative sample for analysis, including various significant events at both the national and international levels, were collected. These data were gathered from three Twitter accounts: the party's official account (@VOX_es), the national leader's account (@Santi_ABASCAL), and the leader of the Madrid Autonomous Community's account (@monasterioR). A search was conducted among the tweets from these three accounts for messages related to the climate crisis, environmentalism, and sustainability. The following words and their derivatives were searched for in the text of the tweets: climate change, climate, environment, climate agenda, ecology, green/s, nature, sustainability, Agenda 2030, COP27, natural resources, energy, recycling, renewables, nuclear, greenhouse, CO2, warming, solar, and wind.

Lastly, a sample of 95 original messages was obtained, which underwent content analysis to study whether VOX's discourse on the climate crisis contained obstructionist elements in the fight against climate change. Thus, retweets were excluded from the sample.

Our research employs a methodological approach that combines content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990) and frame analysis (Benford & Snow, 2000), both widely recognised in the field of social sciences (Neuendorf, 2002). These techniques allow us to deduce the intentions of message creators and explore potential effects on the audience.

To conduct our analysis, we developed a pre-coding template encompassing all the relevant elements necessary to achieve our research objectives. The template integrates specific analysis criteria for studying Twitter posts by Arévalo Salinas (2014, p. 158), Costa Sánchez (2014, p. 35), and González Puente (2021). Additionally, it incorporates rhetorical and semantic elements characteristic of obstructionist discourse, drawing inspiration from the works of Almirón et al. (2020) and Abellán López (2021, p. 291). Please refer to Table 7.1 for a comprehensive overview of these elements.

The first block of analysis aims to characterise the tweet based on the message, its author, and the date it was published on Twitter. Next, we address the

Table 7.1 Codebook. Source: created by the author/s

Tweet	
DISSEMINATION	<p>Creator Date of post</p> <p>Mentions Media sources URL links Hashtags</p>
TOPICS	<p><u>1. Scientific</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1.1 Existence and reliability - 1.2 Human responsibility - 1.3 Extent of consequences <p><u>2. Economic</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2.1 Costly solutions - 2.2 Minimal benefits <p><u>3. Political</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3.1 Individualism is useless - 3.2 Those in charge must act <p><u>4. Redefinition</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4.1 Proposals - 4.2 Complaints

presence of mentions to other users, media sources, external resources or links, and hashtags. In the second block of analysis, we present the elements that define the narrative construction of the obstructionist discourse, focusing on four main divisions: scientific, economic and political rejections and, finally, the redefinition of the climate issue. Thus, the scientific approach consists of questioning the existence of climate change and the reliability of supporting studies, as well as relativising human influence on the planet's climate and the predicted impacts. The economic frame associates the fight against climate change with costly investments and irreparable damage to the market and points out the minimal benefits to society. Political refusal alludes to the inability of the individual to influence the future of the planet and instead redirects responsibility towards those who cause the problem. Lastly, the redefinition of the issue involves the proposal of alternative policies and the denunciation of irregularities within the system.

Results

The ideological debate surrounding the climate emergency on Twitter has generated a total of 95 posts shared by the official VOX account and two of its main representatives, the party's national president, Santiago Abascal, and the president and spokesperson in the Community of Madrid, Rocío Monasterio, during the six-month period analysed in this study. These data reveal a daily average of 0.53 messages for the overall dataset, with the official VOX party profile contributing the highest number of results to the study, as shown in Table 7.2.

If we take the historical activity of the three analysed accounts as a reference, we can observe that the average daily number of posts is much higher than the one recorded in our research, as shown in Table 7.3.

Table 7.2 Twitter publications by the analyzed accounts. Source: created by the author/s.

<i>Twitter account</i>	<i>No. of tweets (sample)</i>	<i>Tweets/day (sample)</i>
@vox_es	78	0.433
@Santi_ABASCAL	13	0.072
@monasterioR	4	0.022

Table 7.3 Historical publications of the analyzed accounts. Source: created by the author/s.

<i>Twitter account</i>	<i>Account active since</i>	<i>No. of tweets</i>	<i>Tweets/day (historical)</i>
@VOX_es	2013.11	76,819	22.6
@Santi_ABASCAL	2011.03	37,281	7.7
@monasterioR	2013.12	35,079	10.4

According to the provided data, the volume of messages published during the analysed period indicates a low intensity of the climate issue on the agenda of this political party, despite it being one of the moments with the highest institutional activity in this matter.

Parliamentary activity, both at the national and international levels, has acted as a catalyst for the climate debate within the political party and among its representatives. Thus, the month of September has been the most prolific in terms of published messages. This surge can be attributed to the presentation of a proposed amendment by VOX against the Climate Change Law during parliamentary sessions. The proposed amendment outlines a development plan emphasising energy sovereignty through the reopening of nuclear power plants and the exploitation of natural resources. This proposal, coupled with the assertion of the right to decide, which they claim has been “usurped” from citizens, forms the core argument through which the political party aims to influence the reshaping of the climate debate during the analysed period. This influence is reflected in the following events: Figure 7.1.

- *Government control session (2022.09.14).*
- *Restrictions on electric vehicle recharging in France (2022.09.26).*
- *Start of COP 27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt (2022.11.07).*
- *Organisation of the III ECR Campus by the party itself (2022.12.03).*
- *Traffic restrictions in Madrid Central (2023.01.01).*
- *European resolution against the sale of vehicles by 2035 (2023.02.14).*

The discourse of VOX and its main representatives regarding the climate issue presents a dual aspect. On one hand, the political party questions the economic

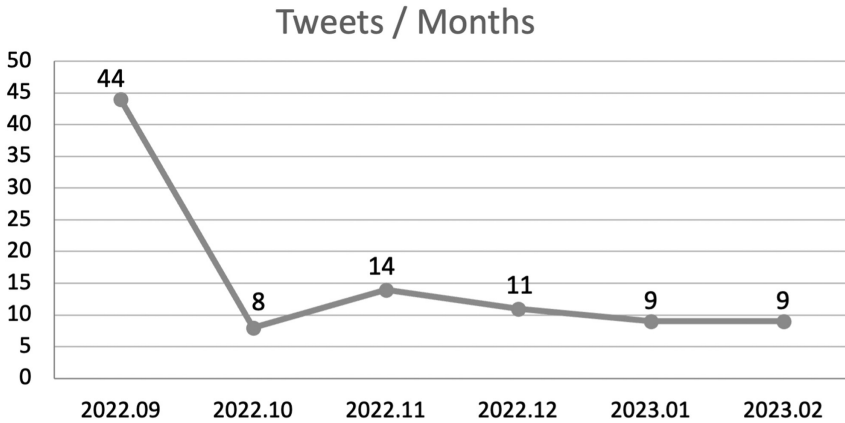


Figure 7.1 Timeline of Twitter publications. Source: created by the author/s

and political actions taken at the international level to combat the climate emergency. On the other hand, it capitalises on the attention garnered by the aforementioned events to shape the debate by reconfiguring the issue through a new definition of the diagnosis, prognosis, and motivations of those involved.

According to the codebook outlined in the methodology section, the majority of the messages disseminated by VOX, Santiago Abascal, and Rocío Monasterio focus on the economic aspect (61%), highlighting the high costs associated with green policies implemented by the government. In this regard, references to the cost of energy and terms such as prosperity, well-being, impoverishment, and ruin are common. In second place, with 20% of the tweets, the political party seeks to redefine the debate surrounding the climate emergency through a series of alternative measures (11%), such as the hydrological plan, the reopening of nuclear power plants, or the right to decide on the exploitation of natural resources within national territory. This challenges the global consensus on degrowth by advocating for economic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, VOX denounces the impact of conservation policies on primary sector collectives (8%), such as farmers, livestock breeders, and fishermen, positioning themselves as the rational alternative to international impositions. This reframing portrays the environment as a market commodity at the service of Spaniards. In third place, 18% of the publications employ arguments characteristic of political denialism. These include the futility of individual sacrifices (7%) and the need for responsibility to be borne by those responsible (11%), including European authorities, the most polluting countries today (China and India), and the largest gas exporter (Russia). Finally, scientific denialism has a marginal presence, as Rocío Monasterio questions the existence and reliability of the climate

emergency by comparing it to Mao’s Little Red Book, treating it as a political manifesto rather than a real problem, as shown in Figure 7.2.

VOX’s communicative strategy regarding the climate crisis amplifies echo chambers around denialist argumentation. They do not actively engage in the debate on this issue but rather serve as an echo chamber for accounts, whether political, social, or media-related, that share the same ideology.

It is worth noting that out of the 95 analysed messages, 56 do not mention any other account, while the remaining 39 publications make use of this resource in 47 instances. The most mentioned accounts in their discourse belong to members of the party itself (80%), followed by affiliated institutions (11%), and media outlets sharing their ideology (9%). The most frequently referenced politicians in the discourse on the climate emergency are high-ranking party officials who are often present in the media and public debates, such as Santiago Abascal (president), Ignacio Garriga (secretary-general of the organisation), Jorge Buxadé (Eurodeputy and vice president of Political Action), and Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (spokesperson of the parliamentary group), as shown in Figure 7.3.

Regarding affiliated institutions, the political party interacts with its own foundation (Disenso Foundation), its own union (Solidarity), its own debate forums (Madrid Forum and New Economy Forum) and mentions an international movement that supports conservative ideology called Heritage. These institutions, supported by the party itself, serve to disseminate and validate its position in a context of negotiating meanings around climate policies.

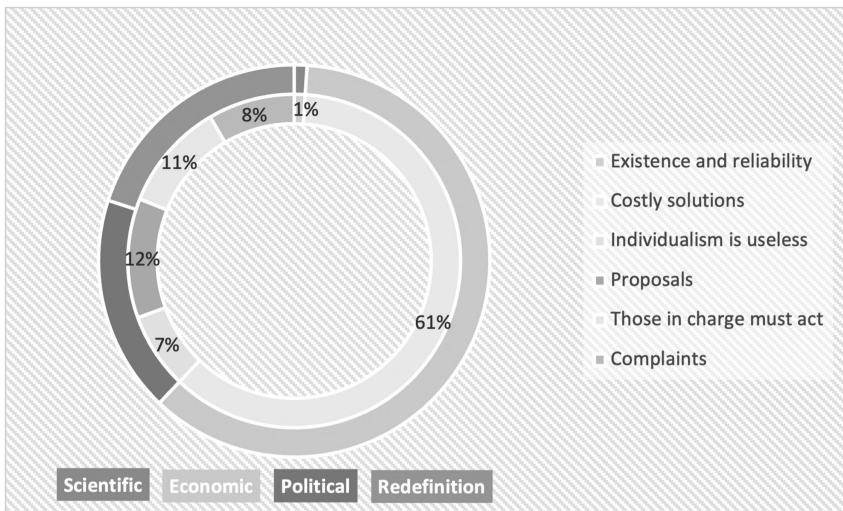


Figure 7.2 Dominant frame of representation. Source: created by the author/s.

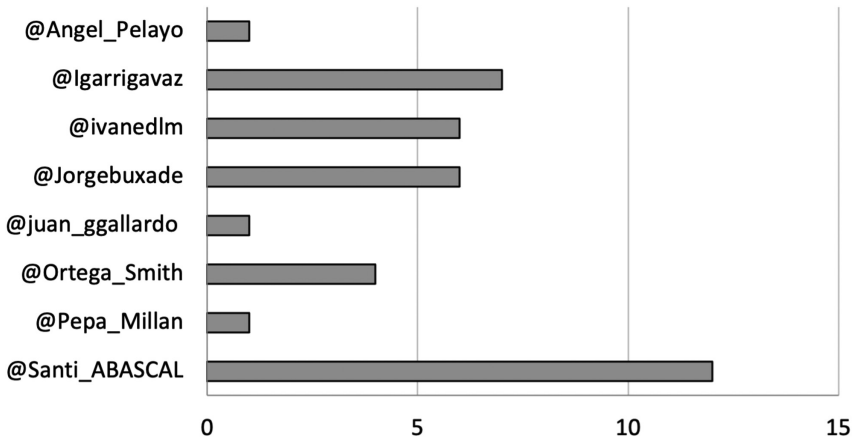


Figure 7.3 Mentioned Public Representatives' Accounts. Source: created by the author/s.

Table 7.4 Links appearing in their publications. Source: created by the author/s.

No links (51)			
Twitter (29)	VOX (6)	<i>La Gaceta</i> (5)	Jorge Buxadé (3)
Media (15)	<i>La Gaceta</i> (5)	<i>La Vanguardia</i> (3)	<i>El Mundo</i> (2)
Web (1)	VOX (1)		

In the case of media outlets, two mentions have been recorded for the radio programme *Es la mañana de Federico*, a conservative morning magazine in which members of VOX regularly participate, as well as a reference to the newspapers *El Debate* and *La Opinión de Murcia*, both with an ideological alignment identical to that of the organisation. If we consider the use of links in the publications, we observe that the discourse remains self-referential and does not rely on external references to validate its content. In line with the study of the mentioned accounts, the most frequently used resource is the posts of other users, including their own media outlet (*La Gaceta de la Iberosfera*), party accounts (VOX, Jorge Buxadé, VOX Europa, and VOX CyL), or their union (Solidaridad). Among the linked news articles, *La Gaceta de la Iberosfera* accounts for 1 out of every 3 results, followed by conservative media outlets such as *El Mundo* or their participation in *El Debate* and *La Opinión de Murcia*. Finally, the VOX website is also linked once (Table 7.4).

Another type of link involves multimedia files included in the publications. In this regard, VOX's use of this resource reinforces its own discourse by focusing on showcasing its main representatives in parliamentary sessions or in media appearances.

The speeches by Santiago Abascal in the Congress of Deputies are shared not only on the day of their delivery but also as archival material to reinforce their positions. The same applies to Jorge Buxadé’s interventions from the party’s headquarters, giving his discourse an institutional character. The rest of the video interventions show party members as guests in conferences, meetings, or media discussions. Regarding infographics, the political party presents the basic ideas of its energy sovereignty plan, which involves exploring and exploiting natural resources and restarting the operation of nuclear power plants. Additionally, they use this format to highlight the main threats that, from their point of view, the 2030 agenda poses to citizens. Lastly, images are used to share headlines opposing their stance (instead of linking to the full text) and to demonstrate their support for social mobilisations protesting against regulations affecting the primary sector (Table 7.5).

The analysis of hashtags sheds light on the self-referential and alternative discourse to global plans in the fight against the climate emergency, although their usage is limited in the analysed sample. The count of hashtags yields a total of 29 results, indicating that almost two-thirds of the messages do not make use of this type of resource.

Among the most recurring ideas, the promotion of party-organised events stands out, representing 41% of the total, with a special impact from the ECR Campus (European Conservatives and Reformists), which accumulates ten results. The most used hashtag also has a self-reflective nature, referring to the party’s most prominent environmental policy proposal, which is energy sovereignty. This idea appears on 11 occasions, accounting for 38% of the cases.

The alternative discourse is reflected in the remaining two categories, as the political party seeks to influence the digital debate surrounding the COP27 summit by tagging their criticisms of the participants in three of their messages, an equal number dedicated to calling for a public debate on energy management with slogans such as “We want to decide” or “Spain decides”, as referred in Table 7.6.

Finally, to complete our study, we provide a comprehensive analysis of the discourse disseminated by the political party through Twitter, taking into account Snow and Benford’s (2000) principles on identity fields and collective action in the social construction of movements.

Table 7.5 Multimedia resources included in the publications. Source: created by the author/s.

No media (35)			
Video (47)	Santiago Abascal (16)	Jorge Buxadé (8)	Ignacio Garriga (6)
Infographic (9)	Proposals (5)	Complaints (2)	Archive (2)
Image (5)	Press headlines (4)	Demonstration (1)	

Table 7.6 Hashtags appearing in the publications. Source: created by the author/s.

No hashtags (66)			
Own events (12)	#CampusECR (10)	#ForumSocial (1)	#VIVA22 (1)
Others' events (3)	#COP27 (3)		
Proposals (11)	#SoberaníaEnergéticaVOX (11)		
Complaints (3)	#QueremosDecidir (2)	#EspañaDecide (1)	

Thus, a clear division is established between “them” (other Spanish political parties and international institutions) and “us” (VOX and the Spanish people). The diagnosis suggests that the 2030 Agenda, the international framework for the coming years adopted by national governments, poses a threat to the economic and energy capacity of citizens. They argue that these policies are senseless, leading only to the loss of freedoms and poverty. Ecologism, therefore, would be an excuse used by the powerful, often characterised as oligarchs and foreign multinational corporations serving Germany, to destroy the welfare state of nations while profiting from it. The prognosis involves reclaiming energy sovereignty through the exploitation of domestic natural resources. This measure should be proposed for a popular vote through a referendum, as they claim it is the only way to reduce the energy bills of Spanish citizens. The motivation arises from opposition to others, defending the interests of Spaniards and their prosperity against the neglect and omission of others. They present themselves as the alternative to climate fanaticism silenced by the powerful, being the only ones daring to confront the follies of progressive fanatics and seeking to restore prosperity to Spaniards.

Discussion

The results obtained in our research demonstrate the presence of a discursive strategy by VOX and its main representatives that aligns with the current climate obstructionism principles, characterised by shifting the debate from the existence or severity of the phenomenon to its political and economic consequences and implications, as reflected in the studies by Heras (2013) and Martín Sánchez (2020). This transition from negationism to obstructionism has already been detected in mainstream media (Frances Bloomfield & Tillery, 2019; Martín Sosa, 2021), but not yet in social media, as shown by the works of Erviti et al. (2018) on the web and by Vicente Torrico on YouTube (2023).

According to the results, the far-right party presents an impossible debate between environmental protection and economic development, conceiving nature as a commodity that should be exploited by the market to reduce dependence on foreign sources and lower costs. Thus, the discourse was mainly economic.

In the context of a global threat, VOX's measures are interpreted at the local level, addressing national issues such as energy dependence, deindustrialization, and depopulation of rural areas, and proposing policies that deviate from the global consensus, thus redefining the problem.

For VOX, the measures imposed by national governments and international institutions represent a clear detriment to citizens. They present a dialectical battle between those responsible for the economic and energy crisis and the loss of freedoms, referred to as “powerful”, “oligarchs”, “multinationals”, or “establishment”, and the people who suffer the consequences of the policies they did not vote for, including those proposed by their own party.

The discourse is articulated around emotions, with a scenario dominated by the enemy, whom they label as powerful, oligarchic, multinational, or the ruling class, and an oppressed people who will only find liberation in VOX and its Plan for Energy Sovereignty. This is achieved through solipsistic rhetoric, in which they echo their own content, either through mentions, multimedia content, or hashtags that circumscribe the debate within their own circle.

The informational sources included in the analysed messages belong to other party accounts or their leaders, organisations affiliated with the party, or media outlets whose interests converge with those of the far-right party. Thus, under an illusory image of public validation, the analysed users rely on their own interventions in parliamentary sessions and in sympathetic media to reinforce the credibility of their discourse, presenting no greater scientific endorsement than their own words.

The narrative construction analysed aligns with the fundamental principles of climate obstructionism, which structures its discourses around fallacies of authority, suspicions of external pressures and conspiracies, as well as misdefinitions and erroneous analogies, as documented by Heras (2018) and Vicente Torrico (2019). These postulates aim to undermine the credibility of political and scientific institutions and delay the adoption of social and economic measures. Their goal is to maintain the economic status quo and discredit global consensus.

Notes

- 1 Source: <https://elecciones.generales23j.es>.
- 2 Source: <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20230529/vox-resultado-elecciones-municipales-autonomicas-2023/2447774.shtml>

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