# Perceptions of university students regarding apologies from Spanish politicians

*Percepciones de los universitarios sobre la petición de disculpas de los políticos españoles*

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**Abstract:**

This paper analyzes the perception of University Students about the Apologies of Spanish politicians whose objective, in most cases, responds to Image Restoration Strategies. The research focuses on knowing if this type of discourse meets its objective, evaluating the effectiveness of the apology speech and knowing which wrongful events are more likely to be forgiven by the audience. We've used a quantitative methodology with online surveys. It has been established for a representative sample of 385 cases extracted, stratified by regions and segmented by sex, of a universe of 1,329,109 university students in Spain, with a margin of error of 5 % and a confidence level of 95%. Among the main conclusions, we found the effectiveness and the positive impact of Apologies as a strategy to restore the image of politicians. Despite of this, discourse is not enough, rather, it requires complementary actions to achieve full effectiveness of the Apologies with distinction in independent variables such as sex, ideology, voting intention, political self-identification and religion.

**Keywords:**

Political Communication, speech, apologies, university students.

*Resumen:*

*El presente trabajo analiza la percepción de los universitarios sobre la petición de disculpas de los políticos españoles cuyo objetivo, en la mayoría de ocasiones, responde a estrategias de restauración de su imagen. La investigación se centra en conocer si cumplen su objetivo este tipo de discursos, evaluando la efectividad de la petición de disculpas y conocer las acciones reprochables de los políticos que tienen mayor y menor permisividad para los encuestados. Se ha establecido una metodología cuantitativa y técnica de encuestas online a una muestra representativa de 385 casos extraídos, de forma estratificada por Comunidades Autónomas y segmentadas por sexo, de un universo de 1.329.109 estudiantes universitarios en España, con un margen de error del 5 % y un nivel de confianza del 95 %. Entre las principales conclusiones obtenidas encontramos la efectividad y el impacto positivo de las disculpas como estrategia de restauración de imagen de los políticos. Pese a ello, no basta el discurso como elemento único, sino, que se requiere de acciones complementarias para conseguir completa efectividad de la petición de disculpas con distinción en variables independientes como el sexo, la ideología, la intención de voto, la auto identificación política y la religión.*

*Palabras clave:*

*Comunicación política, discurso, disculpas, restauración, imagen, universitarios.*

## 1. Introduction

Although it is apparently a very specific and well- defined concept, apologies are an element which have different components which can be analysed. In fact, we cannot conclude that it is a homogeneous concept as its perception is defined by different elements such as culture, context, psychology and even religion (Smith, 2008).

From psychology and microsociology, several authors deal with the acceptance or denial of blameworthy actions as a consequence of different aspects, including social pressure, aversion to error and the influence of one's own ego in decision-making (Gonzales, Manning, & Haugen, 1992; Syed, 2016). Therefore, the acceptance of errors can be defined as an experience charged with subjectivity (Felstiner, Abel, & Sarat, 1980-1981). Considering the recipient of the apologies' point of view, subjectivity is a central element to accept or reject the same and to find out the effect of the perception of the image after the apology discourse. As stated by Felstiner (1980-1981), 'people perceive (or not) an experience as harmful, blame someone else, claim redress or rectification or get their claims accepted because of their social position as well as for their individual characteristics (page 636).

This present study seeks to expand the research on the repercussions of apology discourses beyond Anglo-Saxon studies and to do so in the political sphere where, despite the fact that requests for apologies are frequent because of the high degree of media exposure and constant risk of crisis situations (Herrero & Marfil, 2016; Herrero & Römer, 2014), they are still perceived as a sign of weakness and lack of direction (Mills, 2001).

The objective is to understand the effects of apology discourses in the Spanish context, for which, the research methodology applied in the Anglo-Saxon context is followed. Regarding the sample selection, the university segment is chosen (McGraw, 1990, Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006), since they are more inclined to participate in politics than other young people of the same age and in comparison with those who do not have a higher education (Herrero, Grossi Queipo, Rodríguez Diaz, & Fernández Alonso, 2000, Martín Cortés, 2007: 130). The chosen universe is of 1,329,109 university students in Spain (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, December 2017). The results aim to illustrate the concerns of the new cohorts who join the electorate, which is of interest to be able to understand the effectiveness of the image perception strategies of those who apologize.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Different authors address image repair strategies, among those Benoit (1995), who presents (1) denial, (2) evasion of guilt, (3) reduction of the offense, (4) corrective action and (4) mortification, as actions which will lead to compensate the image of the offender. The work of Hood (2011) and Hansson (2015), who review the blame evasion strategies of governments and public administrations is also of interest. For his part, Smith (2008) makes an interesting classification of apologies and establishes nine possible ways of apologizing: categorical, ambiguous, expression of sympathy, declaration of values, conciliatory, compensatory, instrumental, obligatory and delegated apologies.

The apologies issued by a politician usually have a high media impact, given that normally this type of discourse is closely related to a crisis communication situation (Herrero & Marfil, 2016), as the apology is used as the speaker's image repair tool, to reestablish his/her credibility and to try to restore his/her reputation (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Hence, this research is framed in a general way from the sphere of communication, and specifically from crisis communication management which politicians develop when they see that their reputations are jeopardized or when they receive accusations of various kinds and origins: media, rival parties or citizen organizations.

There are several studies on the repercussions of these discourses (Bachman & Guerrero, 2007, Arendt, LaFleche, & Limperopulos, 2017), which generally focus on evaluating the effects of apology discourses on university students (McGraw, 1990; Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006). This research will take these studies as a methodological reference and at the same time will seek to broaden the scope of study beyond that of the Anglo-Saxon one since an element closely linked to this type of discourse is the cultural context in which it is developed. There is scarce academic research on this topic in Spanish, however, in the Anglo-Saxon world, public apologies are a relatively frequent practice and have more studies and research which delve into the subject (Arendt, LaFleche, & Limperopulos, 2017). Meanwhile, in other countries such as Japan, apologies are more normal, and it is a question of dignity (Haley, 1998).

Despite being traditionally perceived as a sign of weakness (Mills, 2001), there are studies which show that leaders capable of apologizing for errors committed, are perceived as more progressive leaders than those who do not (Tucker et al., 2006) and even, according to some authors, is a requirement to successfully perform top management (Lazare, 2005). Mills suggests that leaders are humanized through apology, while those who act badly by remaining silent and showing indifference to public opinion are not' (2001: 115).

For this research, Benoit's theory of image restoration (1995) will be used as a theoretical reference of the different tools that institutions and people use to try to restore their image in situations in which their reputation is jeopardized. Benoit (1997: 179) lists five strategies in which he differentiates (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) reduction of offense, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification. Among these, this present study will focus on mortification as it is the tool which involves a greater degree of contrition and acceptance of responsibility for the actor because he/she apologizes for the act committed, assuming the blame for it and condemning his/her actions.

Regarding the existence of similar studies in this respect, McGraw (1990) had already approached the segment of university students through research in which, through the development of a series of questionnaires, he was able to better understand the relationship between ideology and the assessment that young people made of accountability and excuses offered by politicians. His work, with a more qualitative character by means of a questionnaire to 98 students, sheds light on the sensitivity of students in this matter; in this case, McGraw himself (1990: 131) recognized the limitations of the study in terms of its low representativeness. In the field of politics and in the Spanish context, there are hardly any precedents on the subject, because it is dealt with from the perspective of media impact and its link with crisis communication management (Herrero & Marfil, 2016; Marfil, 2017).

## 3. Methodology

For the research, a quantitative methodology has been used in which, through an *online* survey, it was possible to obtain a reliable image of the assessment made by Spanish university students regarding apology discourses in politics. To ensure that the sample was probabilistic and representative, a stratification was performed for the number of university students in each autonomous community, segmented in turn by gender since there are studies that affirm that men and women have different sensitivities to apologies (Schumann & Ross, 2010). The questionnaire was sent via email from their universities to the stratified and segmented student sample, thus the universe has a non-zero probability of being selected, ensuring the weighting of the sample responses of the universe.

With regard to the calculation of the sample, the universe amounted to 1,329,109 university students in Spain from both public and private universities, according to the data available at the beginning of the research by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports relating to the 2016/2017 course (MECD, 2018). For this universe, the calculation of the sample was developed with a confidence level of 95%, therefore, a margin of error of 5%, which is equivalent to a set of 385 survey respondents.

The university students are distributed irregularly throughout Autonomous Communities, so the sample was stratified according to the percentage of university students in each of them with respect to the state total. In addition to the geographical segmentation, with the objective of obtaining sample representation, a segmentation by gender was carried out, where the percentage of university men and women in each community was taken into account. For this purpose, data from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports were used and the relative percentages in terms of gender by community were used to obtain a representative sample. Differentiated groups of students from public and private universities, or according to the field of studies were avoided, since the sample was weighted and not specific to the university students, so that priority was given to the geographical division and by gender, exactly as it was considered by public opinion; It is worth mentioning that in the obtained registers a bias existed given that Communication and Humanities students predominated. This bias was not intentional, but because they were among the faculties which responded most to the survey.

The survey was distributed through a link to the *Google Forms* platform between the months of December 2017 and March 2018 and a total of 947 responses were collected. With the simple random probability sampling technique without replacement, a sample of 407 cases was selected. This is 6% more than that established in the technical sheet due to the high percentage of responses, however, the degree of confidence (95%) and the margin of error (5%), remain unchanged both with the initial sample (385), as with the registrations achieved (407). Taking into account the limitations of the use of electronic forms, one of them being the voluntariness of the response (Díaz de Rada, 2012: 200), which would produce, in any case, a selection effect of those individuals most interested in politics, and with greater knowledge of the subject being studied, the perceptions towards politicians' apology discourses. In this way, the data complies with that established statistically in the technical data sheet, determining limitations that do not invalidate the research, which, as can be seen in the conclusion section, fulfill the objectives thereof.

The questionnaire includes a total of 21 items which combine closed questions, Likert scales, control questions and a single open question about the recollection of apologies. For the management of the results and the analysis thereof, Microsoft Excel was used. For the process of the ideology of the respondents, the combination of ideological self-positioning with the intention to vote was used; The ideological self-positioning as an independent variable is the position that the same respondent has of himself/herself on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is extreme left and 10 extreme right. Thus, cross-checking with the intention to vote in the next elections, those who, placing themselves from 0 to 10 on the scale, and were undecided on their vote and for those who positioned themselves at 5 (centre), were discarded. Consideration was given to the election of the party for which they intended to vote in the next elections and were positioned according to the ideological definition of that party on the left or the right. The concepts that are investigated in the survey are as follows:

– Political positioning includes variables of ideological positioning and affinity towards a political party.
– Attitude towards apologies, defined by the individual's assessment of public apologies.
– Permissiveness established by those attitudes or wrongdoings for which a citizen is willing to forgive a politician.

– Scope of responsibility, defined by the different spheres in which we can find wrongdoings on the part of politicians, hence we differentiate:

- Personal: Refers to actions which take place in the domestic sphere.

- Professional: those that occur in the context of their professional activity prior to the taking up public work.

- Public: those that occur during the public activity of the politician in question.

## 4. Results

Firstly, we will discuss the perception that university students have of the political class in Spain. This question is important to better understand the perception of the survey respondents regarding the context in which Spanish politics are developed and the level of accountability of the actors involved. The respondents perceive that, after committing an error, Spanish politicians apologize little (52%) or not at all (43%). Only 4% of respondents consider that politicians apologize the necessary. These data show the limited capacity for self-criticism and accountability that respondents perceived in politicians.

**Graph 1: Perception regarding the frequency of apologies**
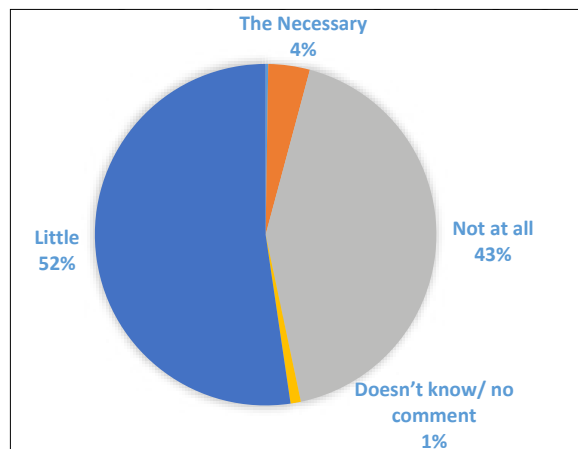


**Source: compiled by the authors**

### 4.1. Assessment of apologies

The sample consulted for the most part conditions their perception of the image, the specific case for which the politician apologizes and the way he/she does it; This is why 50% say that "it depends" on the case in question that the image of the politician improves, deteriorates or stays the same, after apologizing. This result corroborates the line of previous

studies which indicate the variability of the strategy of image restoration through apologies, depending on the context, the situation and the actor (Herrero & Marfil, 2016).

It is interesting that, in an extrapolation of four cases, 25% of the respondents, that is, only one of these four, consider that their perception of a politician improves after an apology, whereas twice as many, two out of four, attribute it to other factors. The missing case for the extrapolation of the four cases, we find in the respondent for whom an apology does not improve or worsen his/her image of a politician (22%), it makes no difference to him/her. As can be observed, in very residual cases (2%), an apology discourse generates a

worse image in the respondents.

Therefore, the apology mainly generates the attention of the listeners who evaluate other factors to restore or not the image of the person who apologizes; the percentages for indifference and improvement of the image after the apology discourse were the same. Thus, it can be concluded that an apology discourse does not generate deterioration of politicians' images. Although there is no certainty that its use will lead to an improvement of the actor's image, there is a high probability that this discourse will have a favourable effect on the audience.

**Graph 2: After an Apology Discourse, does the Politician's Image improve or deteriorate?**
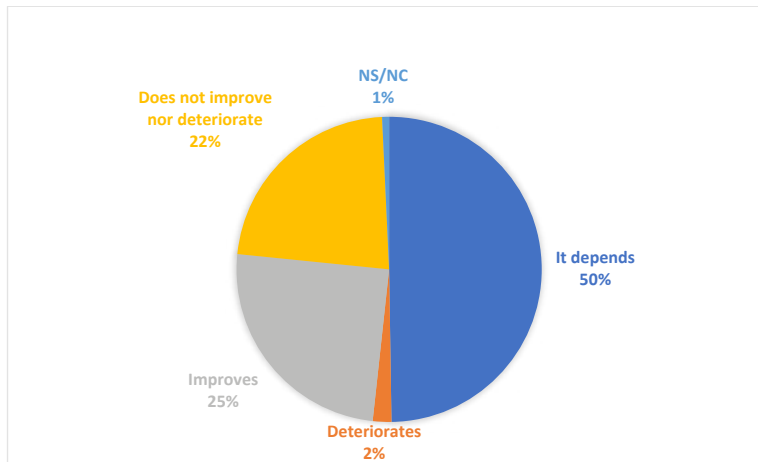


**Source: compiled by the authors**

Regarding the gender of the survey respondents, there are no representative differences in the willingness of the respondents to accept apologies. That is, women and men have very similar sensitivities when assessing whether the image of a politician improves, deteriorates or it depends on the specific case. In fact, in both cases tendencies were very similar to the global group consulted.

**Table 1: Perception o Apologies by Gender**

|  | It depends | detiorates | improves | Doesn't improve or deteriorate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 46 % | 2 % | 27 % | 24 % |
| Women | 53 % | 2 % | 23 % | 22 % |

## 4.2. Scope of responsibility

A fundamental element in these processes focuses on the act for which the person who is perceived as responsible is reproached. Accordingly, we have divided the type of reproachable acts into three scenarios: (1) personal life, (2) the politician's previous trajectory and (3) the public management of the post. In the first one, the behaviour of the politician in the private sphere is valued, his/her personal and family relationships and in his/her closest circle. In the second scenario, by previous trajectory it is understood that this is the politician's background before entering into his/her political life, especially focused on his/her working environment, whether in a private or public company. As a third scenario, the political trajectory of the position for which the representative has been elected is valued, as well as his/her public management. Within each of these scenarios in the life of the politician, the respondents were shown different types of actions for which politicians are usually accused: bad management (lack of responsibility, errors, unfortunate decisions), corruption (perversion of justice, money laundering , misappropriation of funds.), situations of dubious morality (squandering, disrespect, abuse, humiliation), or actions for which the individual cannot be held directly responsible, but rather the institution he/she represents (historical issues, errors of others, previous management). In each of these fields the respondent was given the possibility of responding with more than one option, regarding for which actions he/she would be willing to accept an apology and in which cases not. The results show that, in fact, there are differences in perception in each of the three spheres of politicians' lives.

### 4.2.1 Personal life

In the private life section, grouping all the responses to each of the actions, most survey respondents are able to accept apologies in situations of doubtful morality such as infidelity or escapades (25.5%), even disrespect or inappropriate language (22.7%). The fact that 25.5% is sympathetic to situations of dubious morality such as infidelities or escapades is in line with a Spanish political culture quite far removed from politicians' private lives, as it is understood as the most personal sphere thereof (Cervi & Roca, 2017: 149). On the other hand, we detect that the action for which respondents are least willing to accept apologies are those related to fraud, such as tax evasion, tax irregularities or money laundering (11.4%).

Only 20% of respondents are not willing to accept apologies for any wrongdoings in the private sphere. In the overall calculation of grouping of answers this option is the third, however, it is the second as a dispersed individual option. This leads us to conclude that there is a margin of people who are not willing to accept apologies for any type of wrongdoing, but these are less than those who would accept apologies at some time or other.

In this area, we find different sensitivities between men and women. When segmenting the answers by gender, the option which men are willing to accept apologies more readily are disrespect or inappropriate language with 26.1%, followed by situations of dubious morality such as infidelities or escapades (25.8 %). This last point is the act for which more women would accept apologies (25.2%), however, it is women who raise the percentage of not forgiving any wrongdoing in the private sphere, since it is 22% of the respondents who answer this option, as a second response. This result, combined with the fact that only 5.8% of women marked the option "I do not consider that the wrongdoing of a politician in his/her private life is important" versus 11% of men, leads us to conclude that women are more demanding regarding the private lives of politicians.

Regarding the actions that the respondents are more reluctant to forgive, we also find differences between the sexes. Men reject apologies concerning violence (only 9.2% would excuse this) whereas, for women, fraud or tax evasion in the private sphere is inexcusable, only 12.5% of cases would excuse it. Therefore, the priorities and sensitivities between men and women differ accordingly, showing women to be less receptive to accepting apologies for reproachable acts in the private sphere, compared to those who place less importance to language or disrespect.

*4.2.2. Previous trajectory*

In the professional field, the trend is different since 36.4% of respondents say they would not be willing to excuse any wrongdoing in a politician's previous trajectory being the first option chosen, well ahead of the next option which is to exculpate mismanagement, such as wrong professional decisions or squandering (20.9%).

The largest tendency is that the respondents are more demanding in this field, as they apparently demand that public figures have an unblemished previous trajectory. In fact, the option 'I do not consider that the wrongdoings of a politician are important during his previous experience' obtains only 5% of the answers, which supposes a decrease in comparison with the data obtained for the private sphere 8.2%.

In the sphere of professional trajectory, no variations are detected between the responses of men and women, only a distinction in the least chosen options, that is, in those which the respondents are more reluctant to forgive. While for men to excuse professional irregularities such as tax evasion, tax fraud, or money laundering is only an option for 10.2% of respondents; For women, the least likely option for forgiveness is immorality, such as abuse, humiliation or compromising situations, only 12% of respondents would forgive this. This is in the line with that detected in the private sphere given that they are elements linked to the public figure's morality and intimacy.

From a cumulative perspective, it is interesting to note that those people who are willing to excuse mismanagement, are more predisposed to excuse other issues such as disrespect, misconduct or immoralities, compared to those respondents who choose not to excuse bad management.

### 4.2.3 Public office management

In the public sphere, and the management of government by a politician, two elements stand out above the rest; in the first place, the respondents confess to be able to excuse errors not committed by the character in question but by the institution he/she represents: historical issues, or previous management (38%), this result is in the line with previous research which suggests a positive impact regarding politicians' apologies when they are because of failures not committed by themselves (Marfil, 2017, Smith, 2008). Following this, the respondents are found to be more demanding and once again, they are reluctant to accept apologies for any wrongdoings in the politician's execution of his/her functions (30%), this data, on the other hand, the percentage of respondents who do not consider the errors committed during the administration to be important (1%) leads us to conclude that the degree of demand is very high in this field.

Just as in the area of the politician's previous professional experience, no significant differences are detected between men and women in terms of errors or wrongdoings which they are more willing to excuse. However, differences in the elements which they are more reluctant to excuse are detected again; accordingly, only 8.3% of men would be willing to accept apologies in cases of corruption, perversion of justice or money laundering, while women would in no case forgive wrongdoings related to morality such as squandering, disrespect, abuse, or humiliation (9%).

Just as in the professional field, from a cumulative perspective, it is notable that those people who are more lenient with mismanagement are more willing to excuse other wrongdoings to a greater extent than those who would not overlook bad management. This data leads us to conclude that there are profiles which demonstrate permissiveness to a greater or lesser degree.

## 4.3. Characteristics of the apology

As has already been mentioned, an apology is a complex and tremendously variable element due to each individual's subjectivity, but also to the external elements which condition their effectiveness such as: the reason for the apology, the damage caused, the intentionality of the action, the elements that shape the apology, among others (Hornsey et al., 2017: 827). Regarding the characteristics of the discourse, the elements most valued by the respondents for an apology to be effective are: clarity in the presentation, that it is carried out personally and that measures are proposed so that the error does not repeat itself. These elements coincide with the studies developed by Bachman and Guerrero (2007: 53) where they speak of the result of apologies in the sphere of personal relationships.

> *"People who perceived that their partners had sincerely apologized tended to report using relatively high levels of integrative and distributive communication when feeling hurt. (...) Direct communication gives partners the opportunity to express themselves and empathize with one another's feelings".*

Regarding the measures which respond to control questions, it is observed that the respondents have no clear preference, therefore, elements such as being broadcast on television or appearing before a large audience, do not have clear tendencies which allow us to determine that they are elements which influence the effectiveness of the apology. It is evident that the respondents give little consideration to the location where the apology takes place because it is an

element loaded with symbolism by the staging thereof or for its simple location-parliamentary or party headquarters. It can therefore be concluded that respondents give priority to background elements such as clarity, the reparation of damages, the acceptamce of errors, more than the location or magnitude of the audience.

**Graph 3: Elements to consider for the Effectiveness of the Apology Discourse**
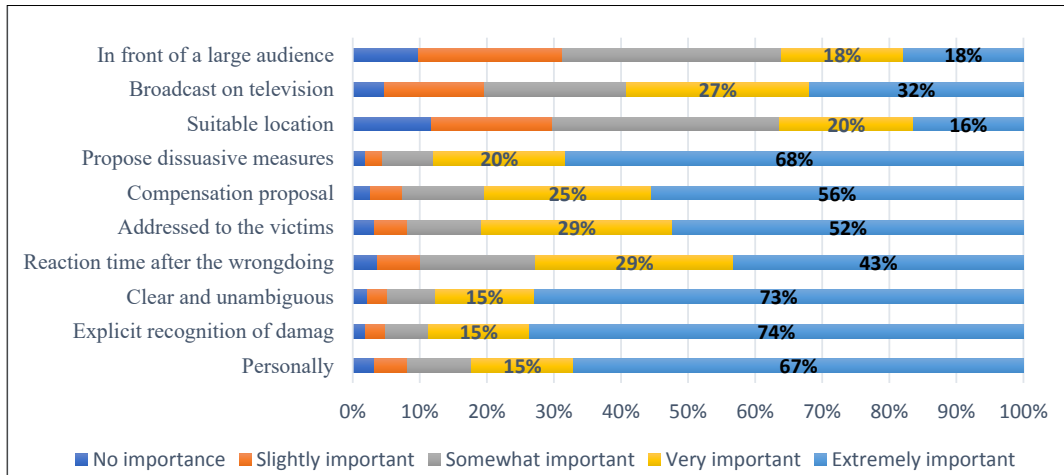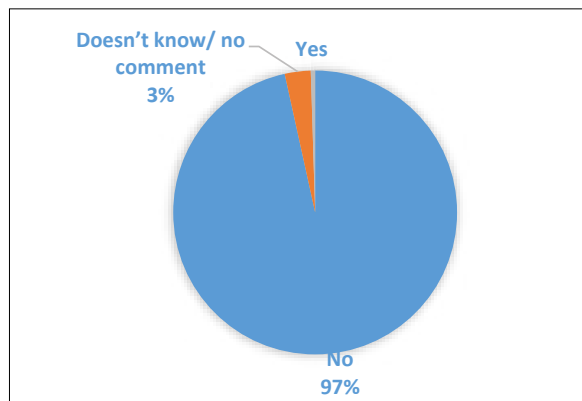


Source: compiled by the authors

## 4.4. Complementary measures

Survey respondents state by an overwhelming majority (97%) that it is not enough for a politician to apologize to impro-ve people's perception of him/ her. This response reinforces the first, in which 50% indicated that the improvement or deterioration of the image of a politician who apologizes is subject to other factors and therefore ' it depends'. Although in general, the apology discourse is useful for the image that citizens have of politicians to improve, it is not enough.
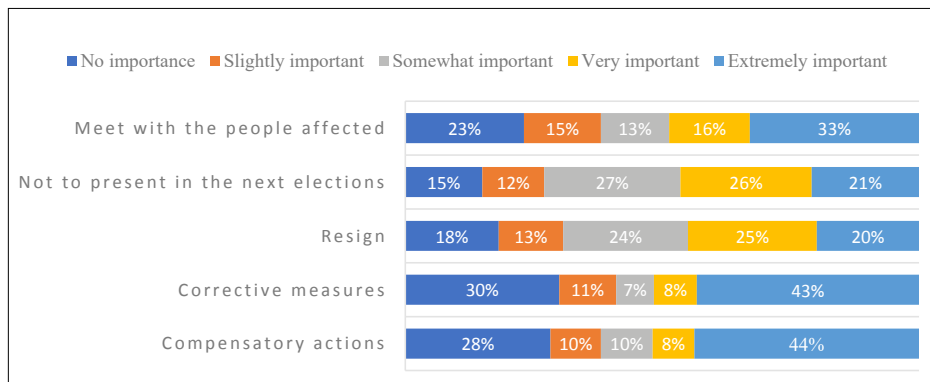
**Graph 4: Is it sufficient for a Politician to Apologize in order to Restore his/her Image?**

**Source: compiled by the authors**

Having made this important reservation, it is particularly interesting to know which actions should be accompanied by the apology discourse for the image restoration strategy to be effective. For the public consulted, the most important factor isn't to resign, or not to stand for the next elections, but to propose measures so that the damage is not repeated (43%) or to propose a compensatory action that alleviates the damage done (44%). This point is interesting given the pressures that politicians develop for the rival to resign or give up his /her office after committing a wrongdoing (Canel and Sanders, 2005). Likewise, this could explain that, specifically in Spain, there are cases of politicians who, despite being affected by scandals, have been backed up at the polls as they had established corrective measures.

**Graph 5: Complementary Apology Strategies**

| | No importance | Slightly important | Somewhat important | Very important | Extremely important |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meet with the people affected | 23% | 15% | 13% | 16% | 33% |
| Not to present in the next elections | 15% | 12% | 27% | 26% | 21% |
| Resign | 18% | 13% | 24% | 25% | 20% |
| Corrective measures | 30% | 11% | 7% | 8% | 43% |
| Compensatory actions | 28% | 10% | 10% | 8% | 44% |

**Source: compiled by the authors**

One of the last questions put to the respondents was the recollection of cases of politicians or public figures who had apologized. Four out of 10 respondents (39.55%) recall a case, although in the subsequent open question, many of those who claimed to remember a case, did not mention any. Despite this, it is interesting to note that the respondents claim to remember an apology made by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero concerning the economic crisis (15.9%), however, consulting the newspaper archives, this apology never explicitly took place. Closely following this is the apology discourse of King Emeritus Juan Carlos I after his accident in Botswana (14.49%), reaffirming the impact that this speech had on public opinion. Finally, the respondents mention other examples, but in an ambiguous way, as could be the case of Mariano Rajoy on various accusations of corruption (4.17%).

## 4.5. The role of political ideology and religion in the perception of apologies

Following this, the answers are cross checked with the respondents 'ideological positioning and religious beliefs to find out if there is a difference in the answers depending on these variables, given the cultural link of this type of discourse with their philosophical approach (Smith, 2008: 114).

In like manner, they were asked about their political concerns analysing their ideological self-positioning (from 0 to 10 from left to right) and their intention to vote in the next elections in order to check if there are different sensitivities regarding this type of discourse. , based on the political ideology of individuals, as suggested by previous studies (Hornsey et al., 2017).

In the first place, it is worth mentioning that the greater part of the results (99.5%) refers to people who defined themselves as atheists, Catholics or non-believers. Although some responses from other religions were registered, this supposes a very small proportion of the sample consulted (less than 0.5%).

The results demonstrate that there is no distinction by religion in terms of the perception of a politician's image after an apology discourse; just as the global results, the vast majority responds that what happens with the perceived image ' depends' on other factors, which shows us that there is no initial rejection, but rather expectation depending on the specific case. Among the respondents who declare themselves to be Catholics, there is a greater percentage of those for whom the image of a politician improves after an apology. This could be a symptom of a greater tendency of those people with religious values towards the forgiveness of those who apologize

**Graph 6: Perception of Apologies for religious reasons**
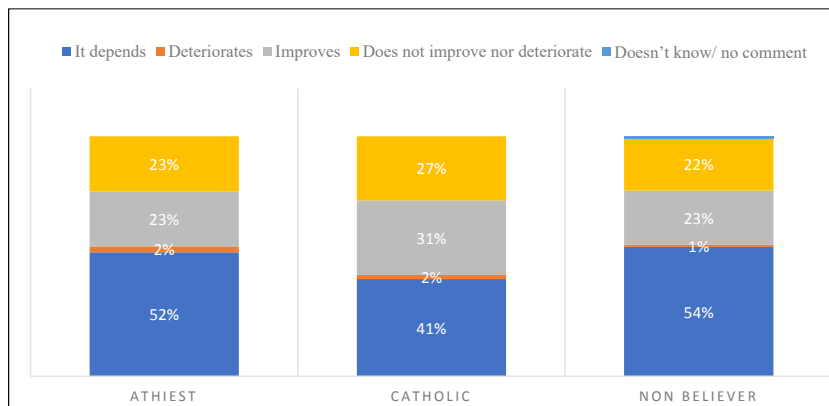


Source: compiled by the authors

The interviewees were asked to situate themselves on an ideological scale from 0 to 10 in order to check whether the trends vary according to ideological self-positioning. Accordingly, it is interesting to note that people who place themselves in centre-left values (values less than 5, inclusive) better accept these image restoration strategies since eight out of ten respondents answered that it depends on other elements or directly improves the image after an apology, whereas in the right wing segment (from 6 onwards), this proportion does not reach seven out of 10 (69%).

**Graph 7: Distribution of the Perception of Apologies based on Ideological Self-positioning**
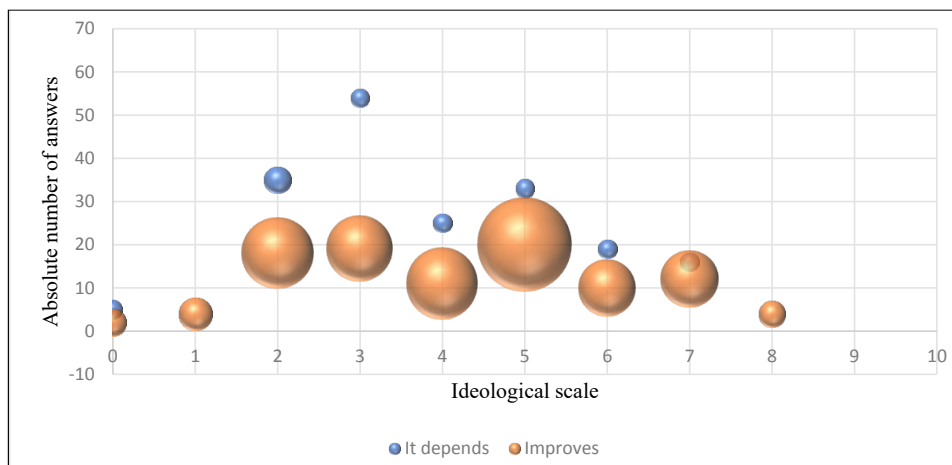


Source: compiled by the authors

In the study, no divergent tendencies have been found between right and left- wing respondents when assessing which issues each of the interviewees would be willing or not to excuse. While it is true that percentages of variable response between both groups are found, these always result in the most and least valued options with the same tendencies. They only differ in the acceptance of apologies for actions in the private sphere. Here the people considered left-wing (auto positioning + intention to vote) are more demanding, since only 7% of them do not consider that the wrong-doings of a politician in their private lives are important, compared to 12.4% who overlook these wrongdoings and are positioned on the right of the ideological spectrum. Likewise, the percentage of left-wing respondents who are against justifying any action, either in the politician's previous trajectory (38%), or in public management (30%) is greater than that of right-wing respondents who do the same (30% and 25% - respectively), to a lesser extent, so that a greater per-missiveness can be concluded.

## 5. Conclusions

Research fulfils the objectives of evaluating the effectiveness of the apology discourse in the restoration of the politi-cians' image and to find out which reproachful actions account for greater and less permissiveness for the respondents.

Firstly, apologies in politics are perceived as a strategy which must be accompanied by other actions to have any effect. External elements as well as the individual's subjectivity must be taken into account for an effective image restoration. Respondents are favourable to accept apologies depending on other factors. The percentage which rejects an apology or answers that a politician's image deteriorates on apologizing is minimal.

It is not enough to apologize. In order to achieve an image restoration, it is necessary to accompany this type of dis-course with compensatory actions or corrective measures which provide credibility. On this point, it is interesting to consider as an inflection point the political culture of the citizens and their perception of the context, the actions to be amended and the actor who apologizes.

Regarding the public representatives' scope of the responsibility, respondents are more demanding with politicians in their period of public management. Whereas in the private sphere they are able to excuse certain wrongdoings, when the scope of previous professional experience or public management is considered, the levels of demand increase in a directly proportional way. There is a differentiated sensibility by gender as far as the perception regarding the wrongdo-ings of politicians is concerned. Women are more reluctant to accept apologies for wrongdoings related to morality or private life and are more demanding with the politicians' professional and prior trajectory, while men are more lenient in terms of valuing aspects of private life and politicians' previous trajectories, placing more importance on elements such as corruption or mismanagement in the politician's current position. These findings are in line with the work of Schumann & Ross, (2010) which establishes that women have a different sensitivity to offensive behaviour and apology management.

Another element which will determine whether apology discourse is effective or not is the setting thereof. Thus, respondents establish a series of criteria which cause the words to have a more or less convincing effect on the public.

Contrary to expectations, given the links this type of discourse has with religious elements (Smith, 2008), the influence of religious beliefs is not so evident among those surveyed since those who declare themselves to be atheists, Catholics or non-believers, contemplate very similar values with a higher scores in the section 'it depends' to improve or worsen the image of a politician after an apology discourse. This shows that, like the data collected, there is no initial rejection of the apology, but rather expectation depending on the specific case.

Regarding the ideological positioning, eight out of ten respondents who answer 'it depends' or 'improves' an image after an apology, correspond to an ideological self-definition of 5 or less, so it could be said that people on the centre-left tend to have a predisposition towards an apology. This is in line with the recent work led by Hornsey (2017) in which he identifies different sensitivities between conservatives and liberals in the USA towards apologies. Despite the ideological positioning being different in both contexts, it is interesting to note that the people who are located in the spectrum on the right follow the logic established in the previous study and are more reluctant to accept this type of discourse.

The influence of the media and the perception of the respondents demonstrate a disturbing question on claiming that they recollect an apology that did not actually occur, as is the case of the former president of the government José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero on the economic crisis. This delves into the importance of perception on certain issues and more specifically on issues which involve a certain social impact. So, once again this confirms what Benoit (1995: 72) stated 'the key here, of course, is not whether the actor actually caused the damage, but whether the audience believes that the actor is the source of the reprehensible action'; it is a matter rather of perceptions and not of realities.

As we have seen, the perception of apologies in politics resembles the perception thereof in the most intimate setting of personal relationships, thus confirming that there is a bond of trust between a candidate or representative and their voters and that this link is affected positively or negatively in the same way as happens in the individual's closest relationships.

It would be interesting to be able to extend this study to non-university students in order to observe whether there are differences in assessment between one and the other or, on the contrary, the tendencies are maintained irrespective of the level of education.

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