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Agenda and frames in the websites of the People’s Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) in the 2011 cyber campaign

L Valera Ordaz [[CV](#)] [[ORCID](#)] [[GS](#)] Universitat de València - lidia.valera@uv.es

G López García [[CV](#)] [[ORCID](#)] [[GS](#)] Universitat de València - guillermo.lopez@uv.es

Abstract

Introduction: The impact of ICT on the media and the political communication model has given a growing centrality to the official websites of political parties to determine their partisan strategy. They use their websites to try to impose their agenda on the public sphere. **Methods:** This study offers an integrated analysis of a) the agenda building, b) negative campaigning and c) frames put forward by the People’s Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) during the 2011 campaign based on the examination of the daily news published on their websites. The method combines classical content analysis, which incorporates variables related to negative campaigning, with a dual quantitative and qualitative analysis of framing processes. **Results:** The analysis highlights the impact of the economic crisis on the agenda of both parties, as well as on the frames that both parties aimed to privilege.

Keywords

Cyber campaign; agenda building; framing; negative campaigning; 2011 elections.

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Translation: CA Martínez Arcos, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

1. Introduction

This article aims to shed light on the role played by the official websites of the two main political parties in Spain, the People's Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), in the general elections campaign of 2011. These political parties have complete control over these online spaces and use them to deploy their campaign strategies, i.e. they select the topics for discussion, deploy their interpretative frames of the political reality, and launch many attacks to the political rivals. At the same time, these websites are subject to public scrutiny, so their campaign strategies reproduce, to some extent, the logic of the dissemination of media content. Finally, the communication of websites is distributed on the web, a scenario in which, at least potentially, political parties can deploy campaign strategies and approach citizenship in ways that are divergent from (and also deeper and more enriching than) those established by the traditional media.

All these aspects are extremely relevant in a context of political polarisation that is combined with a communicative ecosystem in perpetual and fast evolution, conditioned by the omnipresence of the new ICT and their new forms of communication, distribution and interaction. This research, which applies quantitative and qualitative methods to the information published by both parties in their respective websites, will allow us to identify the general approach adopted by both political parties during the campaign, namely, their agenda, their strategic framing of the political and economic reality, and the attacks launched against the rival candidates.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Mediated politics and agenda setting

The consolidation of the mass media as the main space for public debate and public opinion formation in contemporary democracies has strengthened a mediated political model, by which the media become the mediation agents par excellence between the political elites and citizens (Castells, 2009, Ortega, 2011).

Indeed, insofar as the success of political parties depends on the opinion of citizens, rather than on militants and the historic partisan affiliation of voters, the instruments for public opinion formation become crucial to the electoral success. Political information is thus an essential element for the exercise of citizenship and democratic control (Brants *et al.*, 2010), insofar as it affects the legitimacy, consensus-building, decision-making and even the social perception of the political reality (Casero-Ripollés, 2009).

Several authors have highlighted this exceptional centrality of the media in the democratic operation through various concepts, such as media-centred democracy (Swanson, 1995), audience democracy (Manin, 1998) and media democracy (Ortega, 2011). These authors highlight the transformation of politics according to principles, rules and values which, far from being inherent to the field of politics, come from the field of mass communication, mainly television, and its mechanisms to seduce the audience (Ortega, 2011, Castells, 2009, Rospir, 1999).

In this way, any social actor drawn to public visibility and especially political parties have to adapt themselves to the media logic in order to get access to citizens at large, to attract public attention, and

to make their demands known in the public space. For its part, the power of the media to effectively direct the public debate and determine citizens' concerns has been confirmed by numerous empirical studies that have revealed how the media agenda is able to set the public agenda, i.e., the public's perception of the social reality (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, 1982; Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2004 and 2005).

2.2. Agenda building and framing as campaign strategies

However, it would be reductionist to assume that the media are the only actors that define the public agenda, despite the fact that their power to do so widely exceeds the influence of other agents. In fact, there are many social actors (political parties, social movements, interest groups, NGOs, etc.) that are actively involved in the public space and are trying to get their demands known and win the public support (Lang and Lang, 1981; Sádaba and Rodríguez Virgili, 2007).

Indeed, the public space hosts a "fight between agendas", and in this battle each social actor tries to maximise its media presence and to convince the rest of the public actors to accept its proposals and objectives. This complex dynamic has been analysed from the perspective of the agenda building theory, which pays attention to the process by which various social actors feed the media discourse, by providing contents and deploying their resources to influence news coverage (Sádaba, 2006; Sádaba and Rodríguez Virgili, 2007).

Naturally, the access to the media is unequally distributed among the social actors involved in a democracy. Some actors, like the political parties, get a nearly automatic access to the media while others, such as the protest movements, face many obstacles to get their demands known [1] (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Entman, 1989; Gamson and Wolsfield, 1993; Pan and Kosicki, 2001).

The battle to set the public agenda, however, is not limited to the selection of a number of issues of relevance. On the contrary, it implies the construction of the "political reality" (Pan and Kosicki, 2001), i.e. a process by which the social and political agents build the discursive frames to define and explain social reality. "This procurement also implies that reality goes through the interpretative filters of the public agents and that each of these agents frame these events in their own way" (Sádaba and Rodríguez Virgili, 2007: 189).

Thus, framing is configured as a strategic weapon of public deliberation, while participating in the public debate necessarily involves a) promoting a particular diagnosis of reality by setting the limits of the debate (Tankard, 2001) and b) simultaneously counteracting the frames of other agents in order to attract support, mobilise collective action and, ultimately, maximise influence (Pan and Kosicki, 2001).

It is during the election campaign when this common struggle between the agendas of the political forces, which by definition have different points of view and priorities on public affairs, reaches its highest expression (Crespo et al., 2004). In this sense, the campaign can be conceptualised as a battle of frames since the competing parties attempt to establish a specific diagnosis of the situation (Miller and Riechert, 2001). Thus, various experts have pointed out that poll results depend on the way issues are framed, and even suggest that the outcome of the elections basically depends on who has more success in establishing the conditions of the public debate (Tumulty, 1990).

According to some researchers, this construction or definition of public affairs focuses on the selection of a set of values that are presented as priorities in a specific political context and through which the parties or candidates try to justify the superiority of their candidacy (Shah *et al.*, 2001). Value-framing theory considers that there are two main sets of values that structure the discourse of the political elites: the ethical and material values (Shah *et al.*, 2001). Thus, the choice of values allows parties to communicate to voters why their view is more moral or competent than those of the rivals (Ball-Rokeach and Loges, 1996, Ball-Rokeach *et al.*, 1990).

However, we should not forget that sometimes reality imposes some restrictions of first order to the construction of the political reality. Indeed, occasionally some empirically unavoidable priorities are placed in the centre of the election battle, and the political forces that want to govern must assume these vicissitudes in their public discourse. In these cases, parties have fewer opportunities to freely set the public agenda, because they must respond to challenges and threats that are inexorable posed over the political community (wars, terrorist attacks, pandemics, natural disasters, pressing economic problems, etc.). This was, without a doubt, the case of the 2011 general election campaign in Spain, whose development was defined by the severity of a prolonged economic crisis.

In these circumstances, therefore, the battle of frames focuses more intensively on a single issue that is at the centre of the debate. In this way, parties seek to establish the terms of the discussion on a central issue: they provide a specific (re)definition and a causal interpretation of the problem, make moral assessments about it and, finally, propose a series of measures to resolve it (Entman, 1993).

2.3. Normalisation of the Internet as campaigning tool

Political communication research has revealed that the electoral campaigns in the Western countries are undergoing a process of modernisation whose main objective is to achieve the maximum level of electoral effectiveness through a series of techniques imported from corporate marketing (Maarek, 2009; Barranco Saiz, 2010) and the refined mastering of the media's tools of attraction (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Gibson and Römmele, 2007).

The main features of this model are: growing personalisation of politics, campaign practices adapted and oriented to the media logic, extended recruitment of marketing experts, political consulting and public relations, a constant battle for the agenda, and the depiction of political information in an increasingly negative manner (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). In other words, political partisan and institutional communication has undergone a refined professionalisation focused on effectively transmitting persuasive messages to the media and gaining appropriate media coverage suited to the strategic objectives.

It is in this context in which the Web 2.0 emerged along with certain openness of the hegemonic model of the mass media, which favoured the expansion of the bottom-up communication channels in political communication (Gibson and Römmele, 2007).

Political parties have been adapting themselves to the new tools provided by the Web 2.0 to the rhythm of the technological innovations and the process of citizen appropriation, in such a way that each election has been accompanied by numerous techno-political innovations: blogs, video channels on Youtube, social networks, etc. (Dader, 2009). Thus, while the Internet seemed to give parties a platform to recover the political message (Bimber and Davis, 2003), i.e., to bypass the media machinery and reach militants and voters through websites (Castells and Sey, 2006; Chadwick, 2006;

Howard, 2005; Bimber, 2003), the Web has been gradually incorporated as another element of the overall campaign strategy.

In this respect, and despite the technological optimism that accompanied the expansion of the Internet (Rheingold, 2004; Levy, 2004; Jenkins, 2008), several studies about the partisan use of internet technologies generally suggest that parties have used these tools as a forum to deploy their persuasive-strategic discourse and attract media attention, rather than to recover a direct link with the electorate.

With the exception of the success and innovation of some much talked-about foreign campaigns, such as those of Howard Dean (Castells and Sey, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Dader, 2009), Ségolène Royal (Montero, 2009) and Barack Obama (Turiera- Puigbò, 2009; Peytibi et al. 2008), which successfully used innovative techno-political practices and promoted citizen participation and mobilisation, the partisan use of ICT in Spain has shown a strong predilection for the informative and persuasive-symbolic components and for the reinforcement of the party's image, has disregarded the interactive and participatory channels (Dader, 2009; Dader *et al.*, 2011; Túnnez and Sixto, 2011), and has sought to increase the media coverage of their many online information proposals.

In this way, the accumulated experience seems to confirm the hypothesis of the normalisation, namely, the idea that the techno-political practices of the Internet reproduce the main features and tactics of the offline campaigns (Druckman et al., 2007 and 2010; Schweitzer, 2009a, 2009b and 2010). In fact, empirical studies agree that the partisan use of ICT in Spain has mainly been part of campaigns to promote a picture of technological innovation and commitment 2.0 (Sampedro, 2011; Dader *et al.*, 2011; Campos, 2011), which in practice are not translated into a real commitment to promote civic mobilisation, self-organisation, or citizen interaction.

In view of this situation, it is reasonable to say that the Internet has come to represent an ordinary dimension of the election campaign, and that its use is integrated within the framework of an overall strategy, that pays special attention to the maximisation of the media presence, in accordance with the modernised campaign model.

In fact, neither the technological sophistication or the improved design of the websites of political parties has resulted in a qualitative change to their propagandistic approach and their one-way dissemination of partisan content that was already dominant in the first incursions in the Internet (Dader et al., 2011: 147), while the "campaign activities that are deployed through the conventional channels and are directed to the media remain to be the activities that more decisively define the tone and agenda of the election debate of the Spanish public opinion" (Dader, 2009: 13).

Ultimately, the media politics survives, but does so in the new stage of the digital age (Castells, 2009) and of the professionalisation of political communication (Maarek, 2009), in which the interaction between new and old media determines the communicative practices of the parties.

Within this panorama, parties use the Internet to set the public agenda and promote their particular view of the political reality, especially during election campaigns. Thus, the political information that they supply daily in their websites offers the keys of their agenda in a double sense: the hierarchical selection of issues that they intend to make prevail electorally and the cognitive-interpretative frames that try to orient citizens' perception of these issues. This strategic thematic campaign deployment that occurs in the partisan websites is susceptible to succeed both in setting the media agenda and in

producing a direct agenda-setting effect on the citizens exposed to the content of their websites (Ku, Kaid and Pfau, 2003).

2.4. Going negative

In the context of the modernised campaign model particularly stands out a trend that has been spreading in political communication: negative campaigning, which can be defined as the presence of the permanent attack to the political rival on the news offered by the political parties during the elections campaign.

In fact, the academic community agrees that negative campaigning is a transnational phenomenon, present in many Western democracies with similar patterns of social and technological development (Schweitzer, 2010). Thus, since the rise of television as a hegemonic medium of mass communication, negative ads have flooded the US campaigns, and the negativism has increased since the 1970s (Geer, 2006; Schweitzer, 2010).

This predilection for the aggressive tone of campaigns, in particular, and of the political dynamics, in general, is rooted in the previously outlined model of mediated politics, in which the outstanding role of television as the main stage for politics has fostered simultaneously the personalisation and spectacularisation of the political confrontation (Swanson and Mancini, 1996), in such a way that the media logic of the continuous dramatisation of the conflict determines the communicative production of the political parties.

Formulated in conflicting terms, politics lends itself, in addition, to another of the most used information rules: personalisation. Thus, political conflicts emerge as disputes between specific actors, in a battle in which virtually anything goes. This political visibility usually does not explain anything, but moralises a lot (Ortega, 2011: 85).

Negative campaigning is thus configured as a phenomenon on the rise (Hull, 2006), a rational and effective strategy to discredit the political rival and deter potential voters, which is widely used by parties (Peña, 2011). Research on the effects of this phenomenon has revealed that it is an effective weapon to capture public (and media) attention, which facilitates the memorisation and recognition of the candidates' names, increases voters' electoral involvement and knowledge about the campaign, reduces significantly the public evaluation of the political actors who are the object of the attack, improves the public image of the attacker, and mobilises his or her supporters (Schweitzer, 2010: 203).

However, here it is important to keep in mind that the criticism of the political adversary is inherent to the ideological confrontation and to the political game itself, while politics acquires its meaning precisely in a pluralistic context of opinions in conflict and basic disagreements. However, the centrality that has reached the attack to the political adversary in the political and electoral communication processes (Castells, 2009; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Mazzoleni, 2010) reflects a phenomenon that goes beyond this essentially conflictual dimension, as it makes the attack, criticism and sometimes even defamation substitutes of the programmatic content, the argumentative exchange and the exposition of the ideological stance.

In fact, one of the most remarkable risks is the loss of content of the political communication (Maarek, 2009: 257) and the invisibility of the ideological-programmatic bases of the political

formations in favour of a continuous exchange of accusations, and evaluations about the moral nature of the political contestants (Ortega, 2011).

The partisan practice of attacking the political rival has also been systematically observed on the Internet in the last decade, according to various studies which highlight a substantial increase in negativism in partisan websites (Druckman *et al.*, 2007; Williams and Gulati, 2006; Greer and LaPointe, 2004; Klotz, 2004), which confirms the previous hypothesis of the normalisation of the cyber campaign: the reproduction through digital communication tools of the electoral tactics originally designed and developed in the mass media. However, while in the Spanish case it is reasonable to assume the likelihood of this hypothesis, we do not have conclusive results in this regard.

3. Methods

3.1. Objectives

Based on a dual methodological approach, this research study aims to achieve three specific objectives:

1. To analyse the agenda building of the PP and the PSOE based on the content analysis of the campaign news published daily in their partisan websites throughout the 2011 campaign.
2. To identify the key features of these parties' framing of the economic crisis based on the premise that both political parties have been forced to offer an interpretation frame about it.
3. To examine the presence of attacks to political rivals in the news published by the partisan websites.

3.2. Hypothesis

H1: The issues that are prioritised in the news published in the partisan websites are related to the history of the party to offer a coherent image to citizens, at the risk of contradict the latest action (of the government or the opposition).

H2: Social issues are dominant in the agenda of the PSOE, while the economic issues dominate the agenda of the PP.

H3: The attack to the rival politician becomes a regular and dominant resource in the campaign news offered on the websites of both political parties.

H4: The nature of the accusations between the political parties allows the identification of the values that structure their framing of the economic crisis, and that, ultimately, endorse their nominations.

3.3. Analysis tools

This article offers a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the political agenda of the two main parties in Spain, the PP and the PSOE, based on the campaign news published daily on their websites. To be precise, the study combines the classic content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990) of news with an analysis of the process of framing that underlies the partisan discourse and is used to build and interpret the "reality of the political world" (Pan and Kosicki, 2001: 40).

The specific methodological design of the content analysis was conceived in the framework of the R&D project titled *Cibercampaña, Cyberperiodismo y Cyberparticipación del electorado* (“Cyber-campaign, Cyber-journalism, and the Cyber-participation of the electorate”), in which this method was developed to be applied to a large sample in multiple communication platforms and to compare agendas (newspapers, blogs, social networks etc.). This wider study has already produced results about the 2008 election campaign (López *et al.*, 2011; Valera Ordaz, 2012).

The model considers the following variables: 1) agenda, 2) protagonists, and 3) assessments of the protagonists. New variables were added to this original methodological approach in order to analyse the scope and characteristics of the negative online campaigning, namely: 4) the presence of attacks to political rivals, 5) the political actors that are the subject of attacks, and 6) the type of attacks launched, according to five categories that we consider to be exhaustive: ideological, programmatic, strategic, personal, and governance.

Regarding the frames, the methodological procedure proposed here is the product of a bibliographic review on framing analysis and an effort to reconcile different analysis techniques. The works of reference belong to authors such as Gamson and Modigliani (1989), Entman (1993), Miller and Riechert (2001), Tankard (2001) and Shah, Domke and Wackman (2001). The model proposed for framing detection has a quantitative qualitative character and consists of four successive phases, based on the available literature:

1. Watching of the election campaign ads as symbolic-propagandistic devices that combine the main frames of the partisan campaign discourse (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) and provide a starting point to access the persuasive symbolic universe deployed by the party.
2. Identification and quantification of frame terms in strategic text devices: headlines, subheadings, kickers and pull quotes (Tankard, 2001). Frame terms are the repeated key words whose presence helps to detect frames (Entman, 1993), because they reveal the existence of the perspectives and points of view that underlie the discussions and interpretation of public affairs (Miller & Riechert, 2001), privileging specific forms of definition, exclusion and problematisation (Ryan and Gamson 2006). An advantage of this method is that frame terms can be subsequently used as variables to observe the media assimilation of the partisan frames (Miller & Riechert, 2001) [2].
3. Identification of the values on which the partisan discourse is based, according to the value framing theory (Shah, Domke and Wackman, 2001).
4. Definition of the interpretative frames included in the partisan news according to Entman’s classic definition of framing (1993) as the selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality in order to make them more prominent in a text and to promote a specific definition of problems, a causal interpretation of these problems, a series of moral evaluations, and a catalogue of measures to solve them.

3.4. Sample

The sample of this study is composed of the news items published daily on the websites of the PP and the PSOE, which are considered to be the central nerve of the cyber campaign and the bearers of the electoral agendas and interpretative frames. The period of study covers the duration of the general election campaign of 2011 (4-21 November), including the day of the elections and the following

day. Every day, during this period of time, from 23:00 to 24:00 hours, we collected the news items published by the campaign teams (one to three news items per day). The final sample consisted of 96 news items, 46 belonging to the PSOE and 50 to the PP.

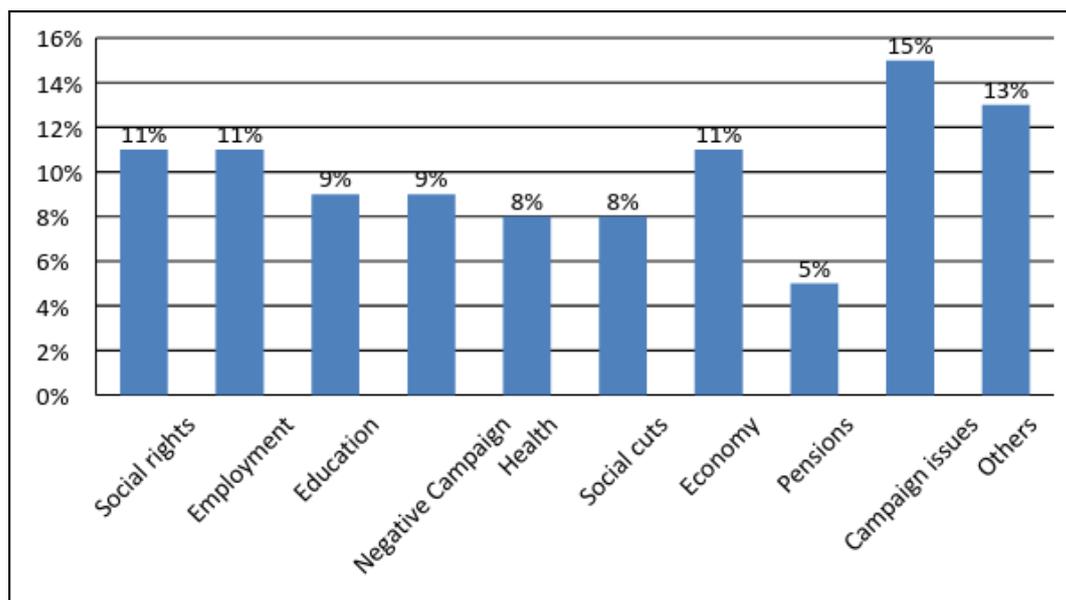
4. Results and discussion

The results of this research study are divided in three sections: thematic composition of the partisan agenda of the PP and the PSOE; presence of attacks to political rivals; and the interpretative frames.

4.1. Setting the agenda

The results show that in the case of the PSOE, several issues related to the own development of the campaign are present in 15% the news sample (partisan strategies, assessment of results, polls, election programmes, results, events and campaign organisation), while the economy in a broad sense (taxes, debt crises, etc.) attracted the attention of 11% of the news sample. However, the results indicate that the PSOE's agenda is significantly oriented towards other issues, namely, the social matters related to the welfare state.

Figure 1: The agenda of the PSOE.

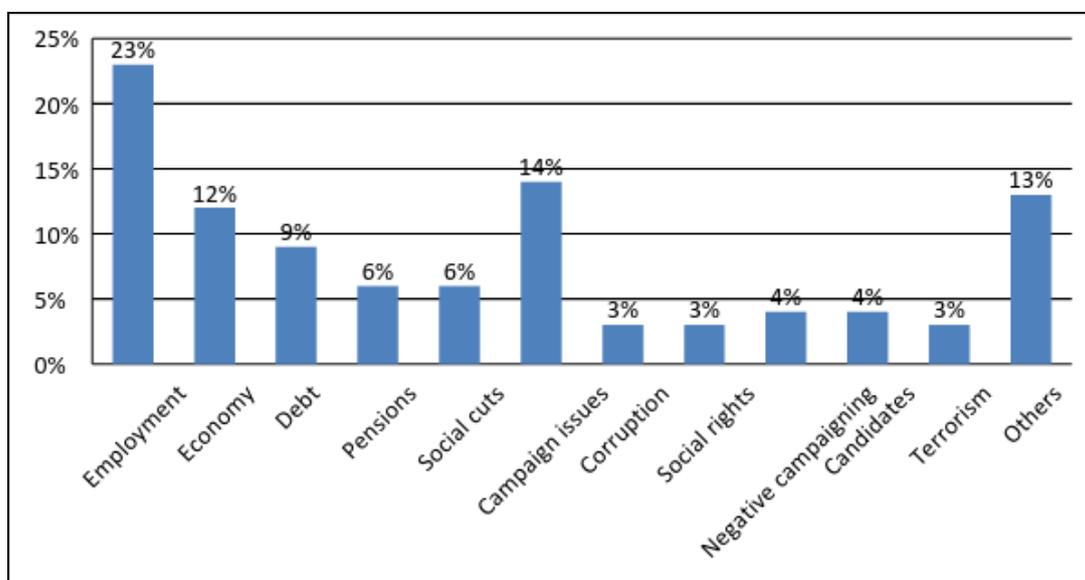


In fact, the issues that are transversely addressed throughout the campaign by the PSOE are social rights (11%), public education (9%), health care (8%) and the threat of welfare/social cuts (8%) involved in the election of the PP. The problems of unemployment, the main topic of public concern in the context of the economic crisis, are included in 11% of the news items. The centrality of the social aspects in the agenda of the PSOE will be confirmed later with the analysis of frame terms in several key elements of the news.

In contrast, the agenda of the PP is clearly constituted by economic issues. In fact, employment is by far the most relevant topic in the news items published on the website of the PP (23%), due to the sustained increase of unemployment in the last two years of the PSOE's government. The other important issues are campaign issues (14%), various economic aspects, including the proposals on

fiscal policy (12%), the sovereign debt crisis (9%), pensions (6%), and the welfare/social cuts approved by Zapatero’s government (6%).

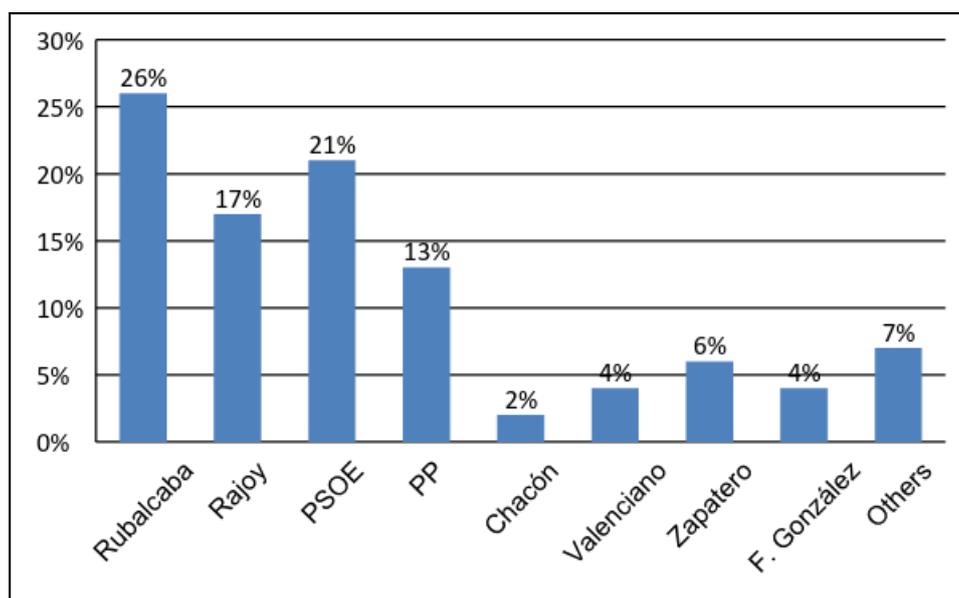
Figure 2: The agenda of the PP.



Other minor issues also receive attention: the social rights of citizens (3%), the personality of the candidate Rajoy (4%), terrorism (3%) and corruption (3%). The latter issue referred to the involvement of Minister José Blanco in the Campeón case, which was denounced by the PP, which demanded the exclusion of the Minister from the electoral list.

On the other hand, in both cases the main protagonists of the campaign news are the candidates themselves and their parties (figures 3 and 4).

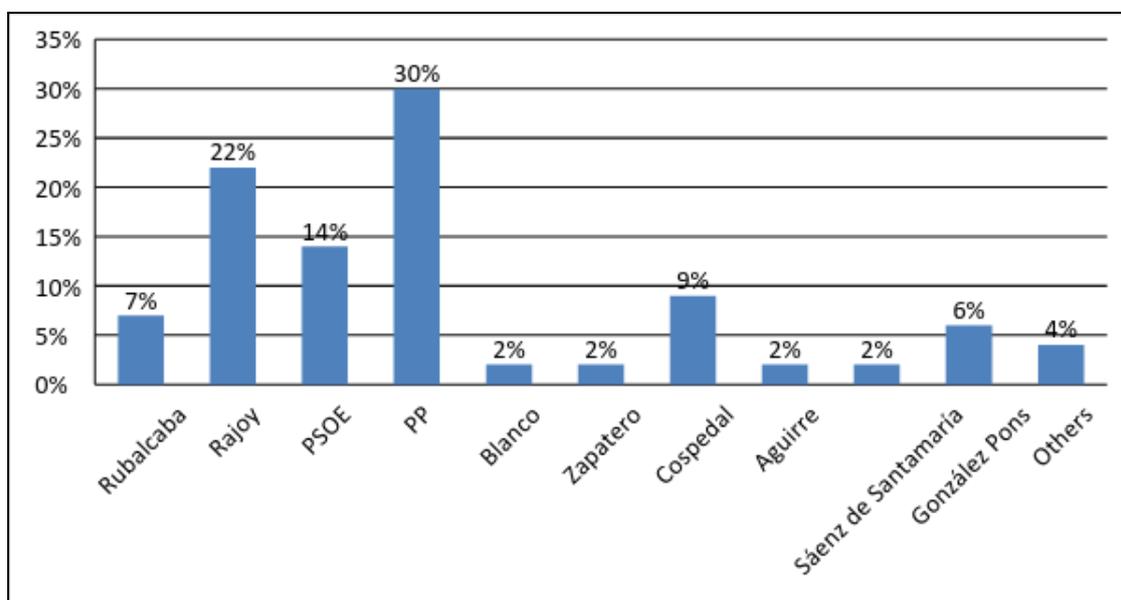
Figure 3: News protagonists on the PSOE’s website.



However, it is important to note that the most common protagonist of the news published by the PP is the PP itself (30%) rather than its leading candidate, Mariano Rajoy (22%). In the case of the PSOE the opposite occurs (Rubalcaba is the protagonist in 26% of the news items and the party in 21%), which is easily explained by the PSOE’s attempt to distance the candidacy of Rubalcaba from Zapatero’s government and by the PSOE’s commitment to present itself as cohesive and strong party.

In this sense, the centrality of the party’s machinery in the election campaigns and the Spanish political system moderated the protagonist role of the candidates and tempered the tendency of the American campaign model to personalisation. All of this is also reflected in the cyber campaign, not only through the protagonist presence of the parties as the subjects of the news published on the websites (and as the main targets of the attacks, as we will see later), but also through the very fact that the partisan websites carried the weight of the cyber campaign, and not the personal websites of the candidates, as it happens in the United States.

Figure 4: News protagonists on the PP’s website.

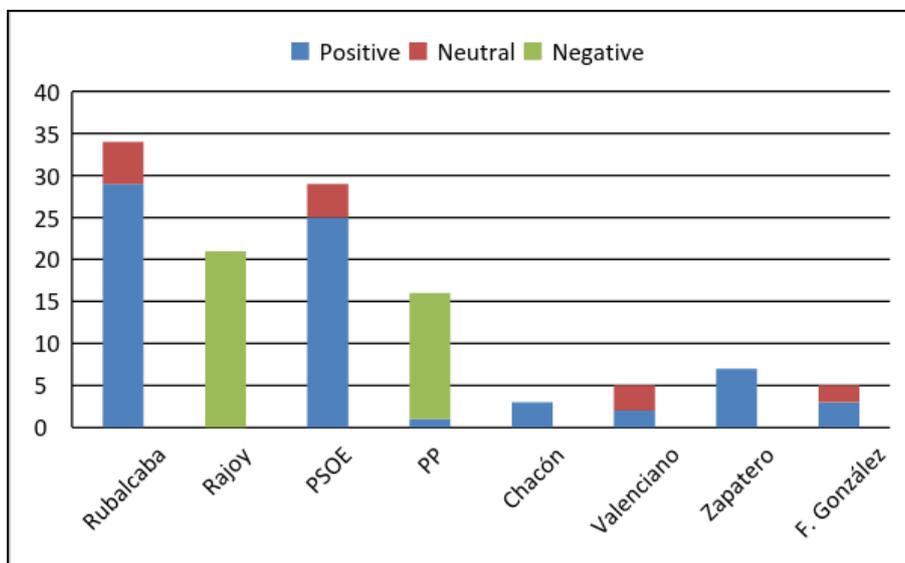


At the same time, the protagonist role of the political rival is greater in the website of the PSOE (Rajoy 17% and the PP 13%) than in the PP’s website (Rubalcaba 7% and the PSOE 14%), which indicates that the campaign strategy of the PSOE revolves around the PP to a greater extent than the other way around. This result stumbles with the empirical evidence provided by American researchers on the lower need of the political actors in the government of attracting voters’ attention and, therefore, of resorting to mudslinging, in comparison to the aspirants to state power who use more negative campaigning as a way to draw attention to their messages (Druckman *et al.*, 2010).

However, this singular inversion of the strategic behaviours of the two main Spanish parties is explained by the context of the economic crisis of the elections of 2011, the deterioration of Zapatero’s government, and the overwhelming victory that all the polls gave to the PP. This is confirmed, for example, by the declining presence of the then President, Zapatero (6%), on the PSOE’s website, which is very close to the figure of former President González (4%). Indeed, the PSOE’s non-existent vindication of the socialist legislature, in general, and of the figure of President

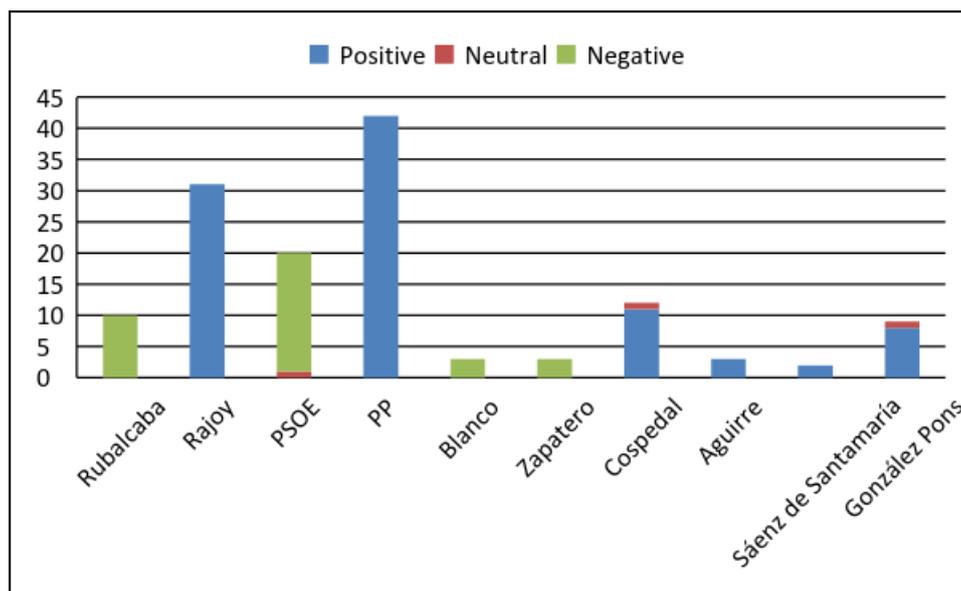
Zapatero, in particular, precisely reinforced the likelihood of this inversion of strategic roles between the party in government and the opposition party in the face of the campaign.

Figure 5: Assessment of protagonists on the PSOE’s website.



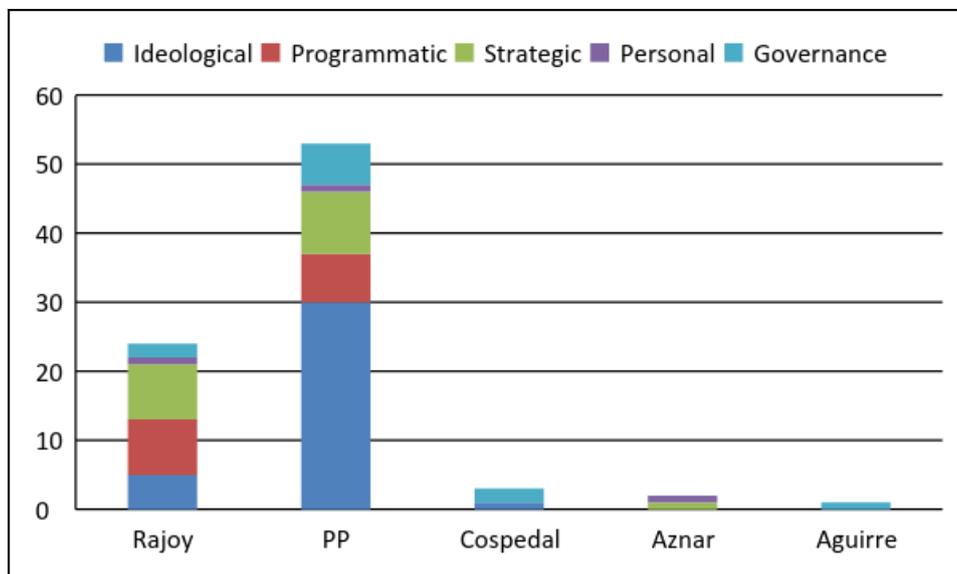
Figures 5 and 6 show how the political rival systematically obtains negative assessments in the partisan websites, which highlights the relevance of negative campaigning in the news published by the parties in their websites, slightly more significant in the case of the PSOE, both in absolute and relative terms. The only exception is the news published on the Election Day after the results were made public. In the news published this day both parties congratulate each other.

Figure 6: Assessment of protagonists on the PP’s website.



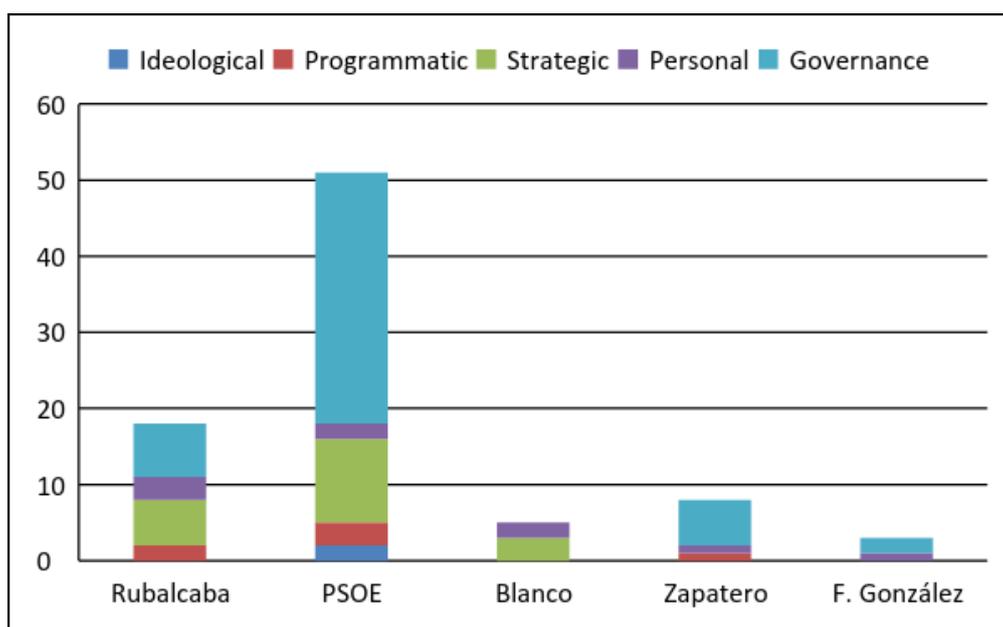
4.2. Attacking each other

Figure 7: Number, types and objectives of the attacks launched from the PSOE’s website.



The results indicate that negative campaigning is present in 74% of the news published on the PSOE’s website and in 78% of the news published by the PP’s website, which confirms the centrality of the attack on the political opponent in election campaign news. And this happens not only in the traditional media (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Castells, 2009; Mazzoleni, 2010), but also in the online communication strategy of the parties, which endorses the hypothesis of the normalisation, in which the techno-political practices on the Internet reproduce the main features and tactics of the offline campaigns (Druckman et al., 2007 and 2010; Schweitzer, 2009a, 2009b and 2010).

Figure 8: Number, types and objectives of the attacks launched from the PP’s website.

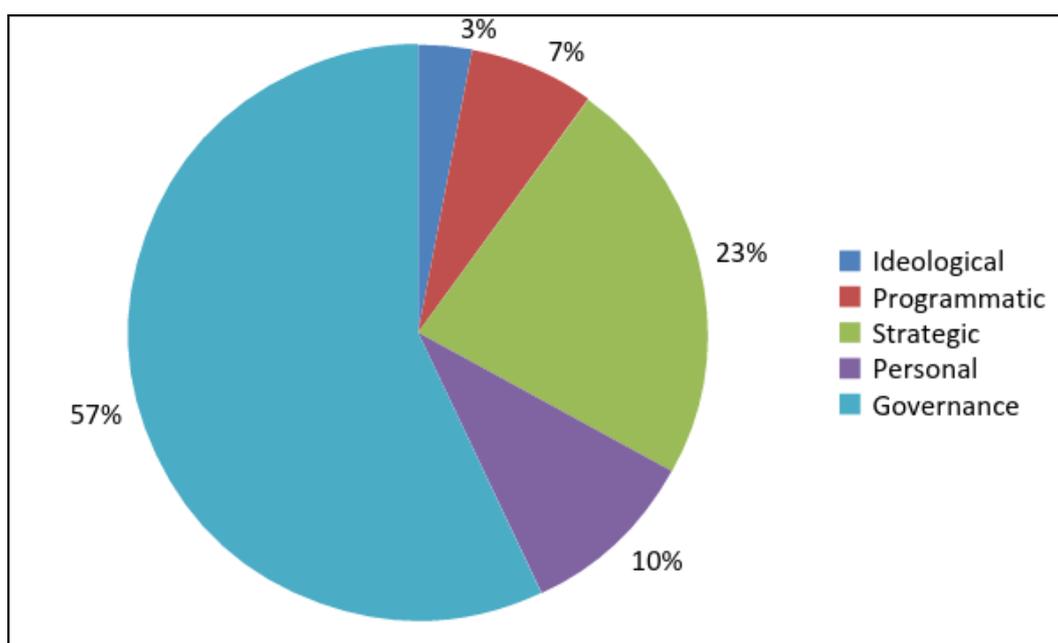


The results show that the main objectives of the partisan attacks are the rival parties, their leading candidates and, to a lower degree, other important figures within the party. As mentioned, the attacks are launched, however, by the political parties, not the candidates.

However, it is important to acknowledge the vast differences that exist in the attacks launched by both political parties at each other. The target of the vast majority of the attacks launched by the PP (57%) is the Socialist government, which is considered disastrous. These attacks consist, therefore, of criticism of the PSOE's government, its handling of the economic crisis and particularly of the unemployment and the public debt.

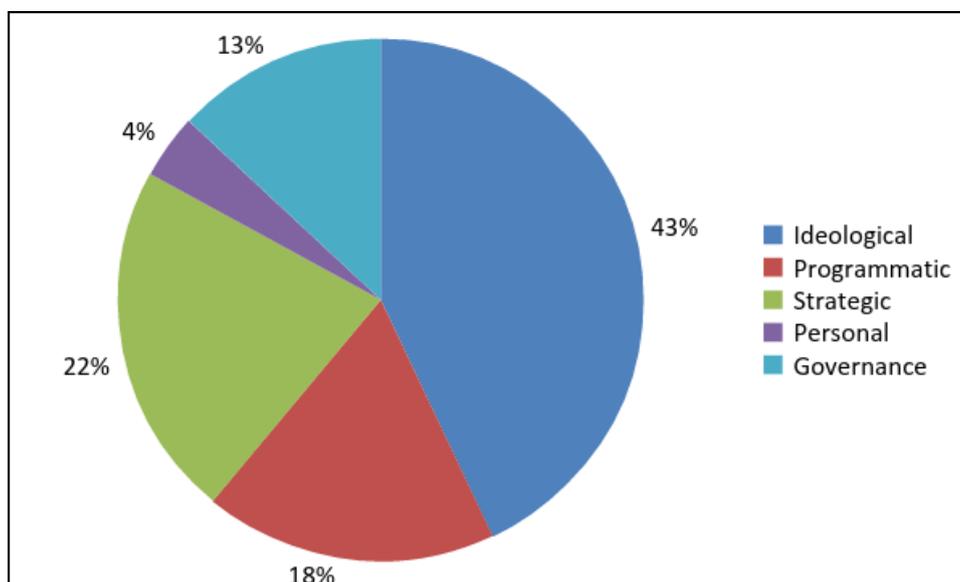
The second main target of the attacks is the strategic behaviour of the PSOE (23%) during the campaign. Specifically, the PP denounces the tense campaign strategy of the PSOE and the involvement of Minister José Blanco in the corruption case known as "Campeón", his inclusion in the electoral lists, and the lenient attitude of the PSOE and its candidate towards the scandal. Moreover, of the attacks 10% were personal attacks against the personality of the candidates, while an insignificant percentage were ideological or programmatic criticisms (3% and 7% respectively), and the attacks on the PSOE's government were considered sufficient to discredit its candidate.

Figure 9: Types of attacks published on the PP's website.



However, the criticism made by the PSOE lies in a radically different level. In fact, the largest number of attacks against the PP has an ideological character (43%). They are, therefore, fundamental contestations of the worldview attributed to the PP, judgments of intentions on the type of dark objectives promoted by its candidates, and an intense attack of the values and principles that founded its political project. The criticism that the PSOE directs towards the PP is fundamentally ideological and aims to undermine its "existential" basis and amend the totality of its ideological system, a sustained rebuttal of its *Weltanschauung* (worldview).

Figure 10: Types of attacks published on the PSOE's website.



The results also show 18% of the attacks were programmatic, i.e. attacks to the measures and actions contained in the electoral programme of the PP. In the heart of these attacks launched by the PSOE, however, there is latent sustained accusation of the dramatic lack of programmatic content in the PP's candidacy and the existence of a "hidden ideological agenda" which, as we will see later, basically aims to dismantle the welfare state. In this sense, some of the attacks that were coded as programmatic because they referred explicitly to its election manifesto are actually more or less veiled criticisms to its hidden ideological intentions.

In the same vein, 22% of the attacks referred to aspects related to the strategic conduct of the PP's members, who are accused of hiding their true intentions from the citizens. For its part, the personal attacks are very scarce, while 13% of the attacks target the PP's administration of several autonomous communities, a criticism that is often embodied in the figures of Cospedal and Aguirre.

4.3. Framing the debate: ethics towards efficiency

The results of the content analysis and the attack on the political rival, along with the viewing of the election ads, have helped in the identification of frame terms or keywords in the following elements of the campaign news: headlines, kickers, subheadings and pull quotes. These elements are considered strategic devices or focal points that are especially appropriate for the identification of the frames that form the backbone of the partisan news (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Entman, 1993; Tankard, 2001; Miller and Riechert, 2001) (see tables 1 and 3 [3]).

Here it is worth noting, however, that the general election campaign of 2011 was permanently influenced by the huge reach of the economic crisis in Spain and its multiple effects: very high unemployment, the sustained increase of Spain's risk premium, the outrageous debt of the public administrations at all levels of government, the financial crisis, the credit freeze, etc. In fact, the Election Day was brought forward several months precisely because of the severity of the economic situation.

In this sense, it is reasonable to start from the basis that the Spanish parties in general, and the main ones in particular, articulated the bulk of their discourse around this peculiar economic situation, offering strategically calculated and significantly different responses. In other words, this election campaign was so deeply affected by the economic crisis that any party aspiring to state power had to tackle this vicissitude in its candidacy, in contrast to other electoral processes in which the economic stability favoured the existence of a greater thematic diversity in the political debate.

Ultimately, the partisan discourse in the context of the aforementioned campaign can be conceived as a great frame for the crisis that was targeting voters, which as such involved the definition and problematisation of certain aspects of the crisis at the expense of others, an explanation of its causes, moral evaluations of this situation and a plethora of motions for resolution (Entman, 1993).

Regarding the PSOE's framing of the crisis, the content analysis has revealed two relevant sets of frame terms or keywords. The first and more quantitatively significant set refers to social rights, the preservation of the public system of education and health, pensions, and the defence of the welfare state. All these expressions, which are repeated in the campaign news published by the party, form the backbone of the PSOE's response to the difficult economic situation. This is, therefore, a social-democratic response in favour of the protection of citizens against the crisis.

Table 1: Frame terms identified in the news published in the PSOE's website.

Frame terms in headlines, subheadings and pull quotes	Frequency
Hidden agenda* [4] (not saying, deny, hide, not telling, etc.)	11
Social	8
Rights	7
Defend* (defence, protection, to guarantee)	9
Education* (school, scholarships)	7
Cuts	6
Pensions	6
Public	6
Health* (hospitals)	6
Right	4
Unemployment	4
Social state	3

In this sense, the PSOE's campaign revolves around a basic pillar of the social-democratic ideology: the inviolability of the social policies in the context of the welfare state in order to guarantee the principle of equality of opportunities (as shown by its famous election video on education) and thus

moderate the inequalities generated by the capitalist system, particularly noticeable in a context of growing unemployment and large public and private debt. This position is reinforced by the reference to the historical role of the PSOE in the building of the Spanish welfare state and the emphasis on the long trajectory of the socialist political fight.

This is, therefore, an essentially ethical framing of the economic crisis (Shah *et al.*, 2001), that defines it and problematises it in terms of fundamental moral values (justice and equality), political principles (equality of opportunities, solidarity) and acquired social rights, that are threatened by the economic crisis. Through this ethical framing, of abstract nature, the PSOE avoids the confrontation of the pragmatic and material dimension of the crisis, namely, its own governmental administration of the economic difficulties, the cuts approved by its government and the detailed analysis of the specific economic problems: the unemployment, the public debt and the financial crisis.

Table 2: PSOE’s framing of the crisis.

1. Problem definition	Ethical Frame
Highlighted aspects	<p>IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION</p> <p>Universal moral values (justice, equality)</p> <p>Social-democratic political principles (social solidarity, equal opportunities, social justice)</p> <p>Social rights (education, public health, unemployment benefits, pension)</p>
Hidden aspects	<p>PRAGMATIC DIMENSION</p> <p>Government’s balance</p> <p>PSOE’s responsibility in the management of the crisis (initial denial, concealment, minimising importance)</p> <p>Cuts by Zapatero’s government</p>
2. Causal interpretation	The economic powers in collusion with the political right deregulated the market and created the crisis.
3. Moral evaluations	<p>The PSOE is the creator of the Spanish welfare state, represents equality, social justice, solidarity, etc.</p> <p>The PP is a retrograde, elitist and conservative political force that represents social selfishness, greed, private interests and class-based society. Its intention is to the crisis as an excuse to destroy the Spanish welfare state (Cospedal and Aguirre).</p>
4. Motions for resolution	<p>Ethical solution to the crisis.</p> <p>Adjustments and Keynesianism: debt reduction combined with public investment to create jobs and stimulate economic growth.</p> <p>Maintenance of social policy: education, health, unemployment benefits.</p> <p>Income redistribution through progressive fiscal policy (high-net-worth entities, banks)</p>

On the other hand, we found a second set of terms referring to the political right ideology (the PP), its hidden agenda and the economic and social cuts, which form part of the evaluative dimension involved in all interpretative frames of reality (Goffman, 2006; Entman, 1993). In fact, by founding

the definition of the economic crisis on universal moral values (equality, solidarity), political social-democratic principles (equality of opportunities, social justice) and civil rights (education, health, etc.), the ethical frame generates a series of evaluations of the same nature on the direct rival political party, which is defined as a neo-liberal party eager to suppress social rights and to dismantle the welfare state.

The political right is thus characterised as an advocate of a retrograde and conservative ideology, in favour of social regression, as reflected by the terms that appear with less frequency in the key news elements but are predictable more frequent in the full body of the news, which contribute to strengthen the demonisation of the PP: “to damage” (2), “privatisation” (3), “lower the cost of laying off employees” (2), “reduce” (1) “impoverish” (2), “recession” (2) and “adjustments” (1).

The case of the PP, on the other hand, shows a much greater concentration around a few keywords that complement each other shaping a message that runs through the headlines of the campaign: “change in Spain”, the need to “overcome the crisis all together”, “the future”, “the confidence and job creation” represented by Rajoy’s presidential candidacy. These terms are vaguer than in the PSOE’s case, since their meaning is more general and ambiguous, while the character of the terms repeated in the PSOE’s campaign news is much more ideological.

Table 3: Frame terms identified in the news published in the PP’s website.

Frame terms in headlines, subheadings and pull quotes	Frequency
To change* (change)	34
Spain* (Spanish people)	32
All	15
Crisis	14
President	12
Employment	11
To need	10
Unemployment* (unemployed)	9
Future	6
Pensions	5
Solution to the crisis	5
Trust	5

In contrast to the ethical framing developed by the PSOE, the PP offers an interpretation of the economic crisis based on material criteria of efficiency and management. Thus, the problematisation of the economic difficulties of the country is built on the errors of the PSOE’s administration, which serve as a defining principle of the crisis: social cutbacks, public debt and inability to curb the rise in

unemployment are the most highlighted terms in the PP’s discourse, which avoids facing the depth of the structural problems of the Spanish economy, such as the exhaustion of a growth model focused on the housing/property market brick, exorbitant public and private debt, sustained youth unemployment, etc.

In this way, the causal interpretation of the crisis is reduced to a mere question of incompetence and political ineffectiveness of the government, which has led the country into the crisis, plunging it into ruin as a consequence of the irresponsible, frivolous and improvised management. The material framing of the crisis avoids making normative considerations in this regard, and finds its interpretation of the crisis on criteria of efficiency.

This material framing is translated into an evaluation framing in the description of the PSOE as an incompetent party in the economic sphere, while the PP is characterised as a serious, solvent and rigorous party that is well trained to deal with the crisis. In this sense, the PP’s framing does not make judgments of intentions about the political opponent, unlike the PSOE, and limits itself to issue evaluative sanctions of the outcome of its actions, according to the results of the analysis of the attacks on the political opponent. Criticism is necessarily directed to the PSOE’s administration, and is the organising principle of the discourse on the economic crisis.

Table 4: PP’s framing of the crisis.

1. Problem definition	Material framing
Highlighted aspects	PSOE’s GOVERNMENT Legacy of the PSOE’s government: five million unemployed people, social cutbacks and public spending.
Hidden aspects	STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS Housing bubble, youth unemployment, public and private debt IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION
2. Causal interpretation	The PSOE is unable to manage the economy and has provoked the economic collapse, a legacy of 5 million unemployed people and an exorbitant public debt.
3. Moral evaluations	The PSOE is an incompetent and inefficient party in the management of the economy, its legislature has consisted of frivolities, ideas and improvisations. The PP is a solvent, rigorous party capable of managing the economy, just as it did in the past.
4. Motions for resolution	Efficiency in management Self-regulation of the market: support to SMEs, entrepreneurs, lower taxes, labour reform. Austerity: reduction of public expenditure and management.

Motions for resolution revolve around the unifying concept of the PP’s discourse and more quantitatively relevant in the core elements of the news: change. Indeed, by reducing the causes of the crisis to the PSOE’s mismanagement, the material framing of the crisis allows the PP to legitimise its aspiration to the Spanish government in the mere need for change (to the detriment of a

more defined programme of proposals), which is presented as a sufficient condition for the improvement of the economic situation, without giving further explanation. Therefore, while the catalogue of proposals to solve the crisis revolves around austerity and measures that facilitate the self-regulation of the market, the true message of the PP throughout the campaign is change.

5. Conclusions

The content analysis has revealed that the PP's agenda revolves around economic issues (unemployment, fiscal policy, etc.) in contrast to the PSOE's emphasis on social issues (health, education, social rights). These are the two central themes that respond doubly to their ideology and the baggage of the governance that they have accumulated in their democratic history. These findings confirm the hypotheses H1 and H2. For its part, the protagonists of the partisan news content are mainly the parties and candidates. However, in both cases the partisan news items on the websites include abundant references to the direct political opponents, who persistently receive negative assessments.

Therefore, the results suggest that the centrality of this negativism is not an exclusive attribute of the media politics, but a transversal trend of modern political communication that has also flooded the Internet, according to the hypothesis of normalisation (Druckman et al., 2007 and 2010; Schweitzer, 2009a, 2009b and 2010), which corroborates the third hypothesis (H3). However, this presence of negativism in the online campaign must be corroborated in the future by more far-reaching longitudinal studies that address various election campaigns.

The identification of frame terms has made it possible to deepen the analysis of the partisan discourse, and has shown two types of framing of the economic situation, which coincide with their respective agendas and their own interests and electoral expectations.

On the one hand, the PSOE avoided addressing its own handling of the crisis and taking responsibility for its government, and approached the debate in exclusively ethical terms, i.e. bypassing any empirical consideration on how things are and limiting itself to normative considerations. Thus, the PSOE avoids the balance of the government (adjustment measures like the reduction of salary to public servants and pension freezes), and articulates a discourse about the crisis from a normative perspective without giving explanations on how to translate that ideological position into government actions. All this greatly hinders the "empirical" credibility (Pan and Kosicki, 2001) of the PSOE's framing of the crisis.

On the other hand, the PP frames the crisis as a direct consequence of the PSOE's mismanagement, ignores the structural problems of the economy (the subprime mortgage crisis, the housing bubble, the structural youth unemployment, etc.), and articulates a campaign message based on the need for a change, but disregarding specific regulatory and operational considerations. Thus, the idea of an effective government, beyond any ideological reference, declaration of principles or detailed explanation of its electoral programme, frames the crisis as a direct product of the PSOE's incompetence in the economic sphere, and avoids the need to articulate a government alternative in ideological and programmatic terms.

In short, both parties try to legitimise their respective candidacies by appealing to different values: ethics in contrast to efficiency, according to the theory of value-framing of Shah, Domke and Wackman (2001). The framing of the crisis is also reflected in the type of attacks, ideological or

governance-related, that prevail in the partisan discourse, which reveals the different partisan strategies to set the limits of the public debate on the economic crisis and, ultimately, to seduce voters.

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7. Notes

1. In this sense there is a wide strand of research in sociology and communication sciences dedicated to analyse the symbolic strategies of the social movements to be considered by the institutional and social authorities. This research is generally known as the study of collective action frames (Snow et al., 1986; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Sampedro, 1996).
2. The results included in this article are provisional, as they belong to a wider research study on the flow of partisan campaign discourses (agenda and frames) on different communication platforms: websites, press, blogs, social networks, etc. In this sense, the methodological decisions aim to satisfy the needs of a wider research study.
3. However, it is worth noting that in the future the identification of these terms will be expanded to the full body of the news items to be able to refine and consolidate the results outlined here.
4. Some categories cover a wider semantic field, which includes the terms shown in parentheses.

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