

The Spanish Electoral Debate on the Press, the Blogosphere and the Online Political Discussion: a New Public Sphere?

Lidia Valera (University of Valencia)

Eva Campos (University of Valladolid)

Guillermo López (University of Valencia)

Introduction

The Spanish general election of November 20th 2011 took place in a social context of strong financial crisis, which led the former Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to bring elections several months forward. According to the polls, the campaign developed in a framework of a strong permanent advantage in voting intention for the conservative candidate, Mariano Rajoy, while the incumbent party remained in clear disadvantage. Hence, the electoral debate appeared as the unique chance for the socialist candidate to overturn the tendency and improve his voting expectations.

In this sense, the Conservative's campaign had a low intensity, since it centered on the economic issues: debt crisis, unemployment rates, etc, trying to convey confidence and hope to the citizenship while it criticized the socialist administration and presented itself as the unique trustful alternative capable of managing the severe economic difficulties. The PSOE, on the contrary, organized a more aggressive and polarized campaign; and based its strategy on creating fear towards the dissolution of the Welfare State as a result of the conservatives gaining power. Provoking controversy about Rajoy's cuttings in education and health once he would win the election helped the socialists present themselves as the unique solid alternative to grant social rights. They conducted a more negative campaign that permanently tried to avoid referring to Zapatero's administration, as well as to mobilize support from their more traditional and partisan electorate even at the cost of losing the undecided voters.

1. Methodology and corpus

Our sample is composed on the one hand by four national traditional newspapers: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Abc* and *La Vanguardia*, a selection that is balanced in terms of ideological orientation. The corpus we analyze from these publications consists of the first page, the whole special section dedicated to the election (including news, columns, articles, chronicles, etc), and the editorials related to the campaign.

On the other hand, our sample includes five political blogs; three of them belonging to prominent journalists (*Escolar.net*, *Punto de vista*, *El Mundo por dentro*) (two of them having their blogs placed on newspapers online domains: *Punto de vista* on www.elpais.com and *El Mundo por dentro* on www.elmundo.es) and two of them to anonymous citizens: *Desde el exilio* and *Materias grises*, the first one close to PP and the second one independent. All of these five blogs show a significant relevance on the political Spanish blogosphere, according to both the searcher *Technorati* and the blogs' database *Wikio*. Furthermore, we intend to analyze the political discussion that emerges between citizens on these five blogs through a sample of the first fifteen comments on each post related to the debate.

We propose a variety of methodological approaches to be applied to our sample. First, content analysis will establish how the media and the blogs covered the debate with the help of variables like main topics discussed, main characters, and authors' personal opinions. For that purpose, we proposed 57 possible discussed topics (related to the development of the campaign itself, to more fundamental ideological issues, as well as to specific policy domains, such as education, international politics, etc.), and 60 possible actors that consist of different

political personalities, the concurrent political parties as well as some other social relevant institutions. The evaluation of the main characters is established according to a simplified method that just takes into account three categories: positive, neutral and negative. In the case of the press, we limited the evaluation to columns and editorials and left outside the informative articles.

Second, the evaluation of the formal characteristics of these blogs will help us establish whether the communication model that underlies is primarily an elitist model *–top-down* or rather participatory *–bottom-up*. We will observe the absence or presence of different indicators grouped into four dimensions: Information, Interactivity, Simplicity of Use, and Aesthetics. The methodological model is based on a proposal by Dader and Cheng (2011), which was tested in the 2008 Spanish election and applied to parties’ websites. We have therefore adapted it for the analysis of blogs.

Finally, the citizen online discussion which emerges around the blogs’ publications will be analyzed according to a deliberative conception of democratic communication grounded on Habermas’ notion of communicative ethics. Thanks to indicators such as reciprocity, discursive diversity, argumentation, discursive freedom and coherence, we will be able to observe if a respectful and enriching conversation takes place in the blogosphere. This methodological proposal arouses from a variety of precedent works operationalizing deliberative democracy (Freelon, 2010) (Ruiz et al.; 2010) (Camaj et al. 2009) and has been adapted by Sampedro and Sánchez Duarte in the framework of the Spanish Research Project “Cibercampaña, ciberdemocracia y ciberparticipación”.

2. The traditional public sphere

2.1. Main themes

The media coverage of the debate, according to our sample of four national newspapers, consisted of 184 articles that were published on November 7th and 8th. We established that 46% of the campaign information published during these days (85 articles) had the debate as its main subject. Since we had a list of 57 possible topics and presenting the frequency of appearance of every one would prevent us from seeing the big picture, we have decided to present the results grouped into bigger categories.

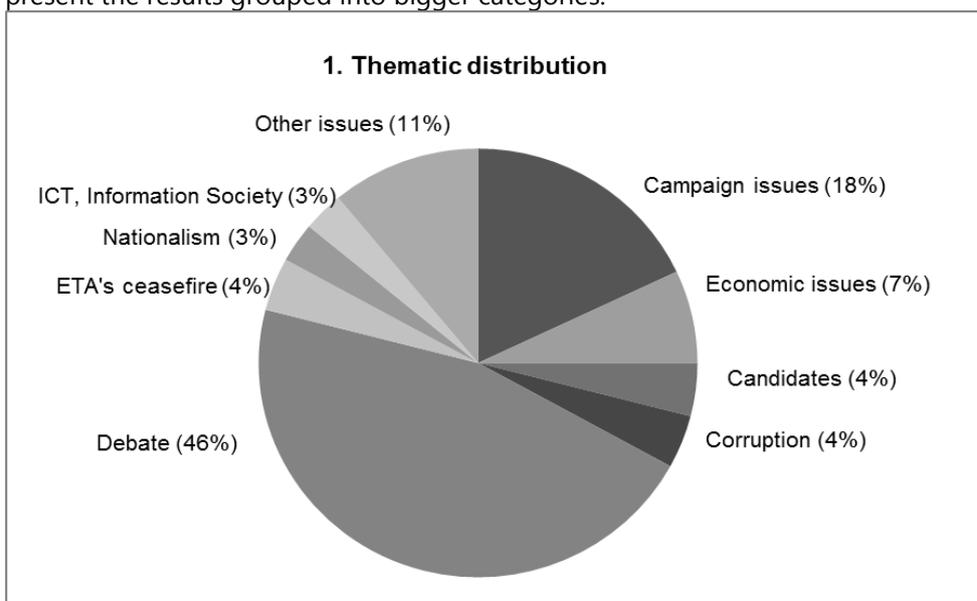


Illustration 1: Thematic distribution of the printed media coverage.

Beside the remarkable 46% of the media coverage devoted to the debate itself (including all kind of genres: news, articles, columns, etc.), another 18% of the pieces of information referred to other aspects of the campaign's development, which included polls, political events such as meetings, and most significantly party strategies, which were deeply examined by journalists and commentators. In that sense, the Spanish press gave a great deal of attention to the campaign conceived as a strict competitive process, while candidates' issue positions or more ideological partisan standpoints didn't attract almost any attention during both campaign days.

Moreover, a variety of economic issues (including, among others, unemployment rates, tax policies, social cuts, and the Spanish debt crisis) represented a 7% of the printed media coverage, which doesn't seem a big proportion attending to the specific critical circumstances that surrounded the campaign. Nevertheless, these were the main issues that received a reasonable attention from the media apart from the debate and the campaign itself, according to the special economic context. Furthermore, the permanent ceasefire announced by ETA on October 20th, exactly a month before the Election Day, had a moderate presence (4%) during both days, while nationalism and aspects related to the partisan and citizen use of Information and Communication Technologies attracted a 3% of attention. Corruption was also a hot topic during the campaign, especially for the newspaper *El Mundo*, which tried to set the agenda by bringing up all the details of a corruption scandal involving Socialist Minister José Blanco in a clear strategy to sabotage his reputation and criticize Rubalcaba's attitude towards the scandal.

Finally, personal information about both socialist and conservative candidate proliferated; so that all newspapers published articles reconstructing their biographical and political trajectories (4%). To a remarkable extent, the printed press presented the debate as a personal confrontation between two individuals with their respective personalities' strengths and weaknesses.

2.2. Main characters

Regarding the characters that were involved in the different pieces of information, the two major candidates, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba (PSOE) and Mariano Rajoy (PP), were the subject of 50% of the media coverage, while other minor candidates just appeared in a residual 5%.

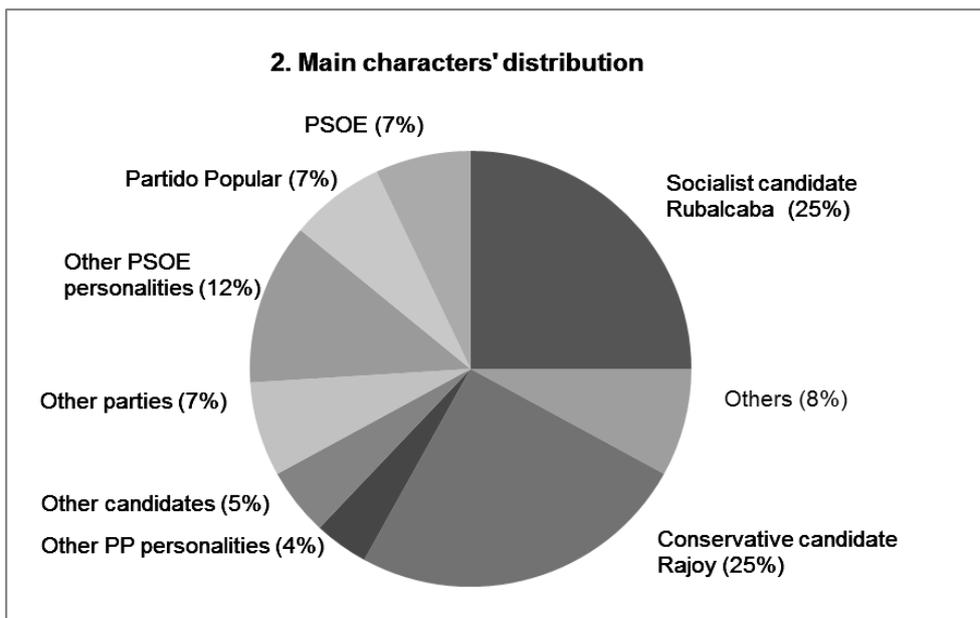


Illustration 2: Main characters distribution of the printed press coverage.

The same trend, though less pronounced, was present among political parties, since PSOE and PP, the two major parties of the Spanish party-system, received a 7% of attention each of them, while the rest of the running parties, such as Catalan and Basque nationalists (CiU, ICV, Amaiur) or other national parties (IU, UPyD, Equo) had a much more moderate presence altogether (7%).

Furthermore, it is quite striking that 12% of the coverage dealt with other PSOE personalities, while just a 4% involved another PP members. A few reasons help explain this result. First of all, the turbulences within the PSOE attracted more informative attention, since Zapatero was systematically marginalized from public life by the socialist campaign and just received a ridiculous 3% of attention, whereas other historical members of the party, such as the Ex Prime Minister Felipe González (in office from 1982-1996), retired from political activity for years now, had significantly more presence. Second, journalists, specially those from conservative media, started to speculate about leadership and internal reorganization within the PSOE after Zapatero, as different polls confirmed the big probability to get its worst results in Spanish democracy's history. These circumstances made informations about PSOE far more attractive for the press.

2.3. Evaluations

We limited the analysis of journalistic opinions about the candidates and other political actors to the opinion genres (columns, articles, editorials) in order to observe the general evaluation of the candidates' performance at the electoral debate.

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Rubalcaba</i>	8 (19%)	4 (9%)	33 (73%)	45
<i>Rajoy</i>	24 (54%)	8 (19%)	13 (27%)	45
<i>PSOE</i>	1	1	7	9
<i>PP</i>	1	0	7	8
<i>Other PSOE members</i>	0	0	10	10
<i>Other PP members</i>	0	0	2	2

Table 1: Printed press' evaluations on candidates and other political actors.

In that sense, the conservative candidate Mariano Rajoy obtained a moderate positive evaluation (54%) according to a tight majority of the columnists and essayists from the traditional media, whereas Rubalcaba's negative evaluation enjoyed significantly more consensus among journalists (73%). In fact, the socialist candidate was particularly criticized due to his belligerent performance during the debate, where he somehow anticipated the conservative victory and therefore ended up interviewing his opponent and advancing his role as the parliamentary opposition. Rajoy's victory was therefore a consequence of the socialist inability to defend their administration.

3. The debate on the new digital public sphere

3.1. The blogosphere

In the case of the blogosphere, there is remarkable agreement among the five bloggers about one aspect: the lack of competitiveness of the election, as it was sanctioned by public opinion polls (that proved to be accurate according to election results).

In fact, the socialist candidate approached the debate in a state of extreme weakness, caused by the impact of the crisis and the cost of management of the socialist government of Rodríguez Zapatero. On the contrary, the popular candidate, Mariano Rajoy, faced the dialectical confrontation with a strong advantage in vote intention. This baseline was reflected on the

debate, as it was pointed out in the analysis of the five bloggers. In fact, it was enough for Rajoy to expose macroeconomic data (unemployment rate, the weakness of Spanish debt, etc.) to leave his opponent with no arguments and severely erode the foundations of his credibility.

Thus, the debate staged perfectly the electoral expectations of each candidate. In fact, Rubalcaba tried to force the PP candidate to reveal his intentions, by "interviewing" Rajoy (as some bloggers, like Ignacio Escolar and Roger Senserrich of *Materias Grises*, emphasized). So, Rubalcaba implicitly recognized that Rajoy was going to win the election.

Concerning the most important issues discussed, the analysis shows that the bloggers spoke mainly about economic topics such as the unemployment rate (*Punto de vista*), the economic and social cuts (*Materias Grises*), the debt crisis (*Desde el Exilio*), the health system (*Punto de vista*) and the retirement incomes (*El Mundo por dentro*).

Beyond the economic issues, bloggers focused on the estimation of election results (*El Mundo por dentro*, *Materias Grises*) and some anecdotic or personal aspects, related to the candidates themselves and how they performed during the debate (*Escolar.net*, *Desde el Exilio*). Furthermore, most bloggers highlighted the lack of brilliance of both argumentations, and some of them (Arcadi Espada, Ignacio Escolar) specifically criticized Mariano Rajoy, since he avoided responding to the opponent's questions and often read during his intervention.

As a result, most bloggers gave a negative evaluation for both candidates, even though our blogs' sample is quite differentiated in ideological terms. For example, Ignacio Escolar considered positively Rubalcaba, whereas *Desde el Exilio* praised Rajoy's performance and *Materias Grises* was the only blogger who valued the two candidates.

Finally, regarding the impact of the posts on social networks, it was generally limited: about 5 to 20 comments and recommendations on Twitter and Facebook for each post. The only exception is the post of Ignacio Escolar, with 262 reviews, over 200 recommendations on Facebook and 80 on Twitter. In fact, the post of Escolar is the only one that appeared on the recommendation network *Menéame* (similar to *Digg*), with a total of 46 recommendations.

With reference to the discourse analysis, our study suggests that all the blogs showed a clear political alignment, even in those written by journalists: Popular Party in the case of Espada; and PSOE in Ceberio's. Although there were no explicit references to the political preferences of each author, the ideological position of the posts identified with the political discourse of those parties. The same alignment took place within the rest of our sample: *Materias grises* and *Escolar.net* identified with left-wing options, while *Desde el exilio* stood for a conservative ideology. In general terms, our sample showed a majority opposition to the PP, though the authors did not necessarily align themselves completely with PSOE.

Undoubtedly, political news prevailed on all blogs among our sample. However, while *Punto de vista* was conceived exclusively to the campaign, the rest of the blogs showed more thematic diversity and weren't exclusively created for the campaign.

There was a prominent difference in the prevailing communication model between the blogs hosted on online media and the citizen independent blogs. Whereas the first responded to a clear elitist model -top-down communication- the other three constituted a hybrid model showing more participatory tendencies between authors and users. Even though there were no posts published by other users on these three blogs, they did include information from other social networks' profiles such as Twitter, showing a more extensive multimedia approach. For

the most part, both journalists used their blogs as an opinion and information platform, rather than as a tool of interaction with readers, therefore not exploiting its participatory potential.

3.2. The online political discussion: ¿deliberation 2.0?

Our analysis of the five conversations which arose on the bloggers' posts about the debate consists of a sample of 65 comments. Despite the very limited size of the sample, our findings indicate that these dialogues were characterized by a high diversity (84%), defined as the number of commentators divided by the total comments' number, as well as by a non-existing reciprocity, since there was just a response from an author. Regarding discursive diversity, a significant 43% of comments remained neutral to the opinion expressed by the author, while a remarkable 40% expressed explicit support, and just a 17% contained opposition.

As far as rationality is concerned, 52% of the comments included reasoned arguments justifying their points of view, although no evidence was provided to justify positions in any case. Still, a notable 48% showed no argumentation at all. In terms of discursive freedom, an 82% showed a neutral, aggressive-free language, while an 8% contained harsh language (insults, cursing), and a 10% included harsh language addressed to concrete individuals. Finally, two thirds of the comments exhibited coherence regarding the posts' discussed topics, whereas the other third had nothing to do with them.

In conclusion, despite the acceptable level of discursive freedom (80%) and reasoned comments (52%), scarce reciprocity (1,5%), extreme diversity (84%) and a majority of comments expressing either support (40%) or incoherence (33%), deters the development of a true deliberation, in which individuals express their different opinions, listen to each other and are willing to respond and debate their confronted arguments.

Conclusion

Regarding the coverage of the electoral debate, the Spanish press considerably reproduced the inclination of the political communication in Western postindustrial democracies to present political campaigns as horse races, where personalization, political infotainment and sensationalism tend to be the rule to the prejudice of more elaborated public policy information (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997) (Castells, 2009).

Issues related to the campaign itself, including the information about the debate, totally dominated the media coverage, even though some other topics like economic issues, nationalism, corruption and ETA's ceasefire gained some relevance. In fact, the insistence of a concrete newspaper, *El Mundo*, to bring up the corruption scandal involving a Socialist Minister and place it as campaign information (while other corruption scandals would be treated in other sections) reflects the polarized pluralism of the Spanish media system, in which the different news organizations set their own political agendas and clearly exhibit their ideological and institutional alliances (Hallin & Mancini, 2008), often by attacking their political opponents (Castromil, 2006, 2008).

Concerning the main characters, candidates of the two major parties attracted the most attention, as well as their respective parties, while other minor candidates or parties remained in strong second place. Furthermore, there was a moderate journalistic consensus about the conservative's victory (54%) winning the debate, though not because of his brilliant performance, but rather as a result of the extreme weakness of Rubalcaba and the cost of Zapatero's administration. Still, the press showed more agreement on the negative evaluation of Rubalcaba (73%), which confirms the increasing media tendency to go negative on the political and electoral coverage (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997).

For the most part, on the other hand, the blogosphere proved to be more demanding with both candidates, since the bloggers gave a more negative evaluation in general terms to both politicians. Regarding the most discussed issues, bloggers focused more intensely on hard political topics, especially on economic issues, although they also paid great attention to campaign procedures, such as polls and results' estimations. Nevertheless, the digital sphere seemed to provide more space for the analysis of candidates' issue positions than the printed press, which concentrated more intensively on party' strategies and campaign issues.

An-elitist model of communication prevailed on both blogs placed on news' online domains, since the authors wrote their articles with the traditional top-down media logic, not providing any interactivity options. By contrast, the other three blogs showed a rather more participatory tendency, although user activity was still scarce: there were only comments to the posts, which were disseminated on social media through the classical content share options. Finally, in all the blogs we could find political biased information, showing polarization mainly around the two major Spanish parties, PP and PSOE, and therefore reproducing the politicized pattern of the Spanish media system (Sampedro & Seoane, 2009) (Hallin & Mancini, 2008).

As far as the online political discussion is concerned and despite of our limited sample, our findings do not indicate that the communicative interaction that is taking place in the new public sphere can be conceived as a deliberation. On the contrary, conversations rather exhibited high fragmentation (84% diversity), an insignificant reciprocity between authors and users (1,5%) and a tendency towards ideological homogeneity that severely hindered the existence of an enriching and pluralistic democratic dialogue (Precht, 2010) (Ruiz et al., 2010) (Sunstein, 2007).

Bibliography

ANSOLABEHERE, Stephen & IYENGAR, Shanto: Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink & Polarize the Electorate. First ed. New York: The Free Press, 1997, 243 p.

CAMAJ, Lindita, HONG, Seong Choul, LANOSGA, Gerry & LUO, Yunjuan. Political Discourse on Facebook: A New Public Sphere? Aug 05, 2009 Shreraton Boston, Boston, MA (Page consulted April 15th 2012). URL: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p375074_index.html

CASTROMIL, Antón. El negativismo mediático en las Elecciones Generales 2008. (2012, April, 15th). Publicaciones de Antón Castromil, Departamento de Sociología VI, Universidad Complutense [Online]. URL: <http://www.ucm.es/info/socvi/gtsocvi/documentos/WP-2008-01.pdf>

CASTROMIL, Antón. Negativismo mediático y pluralismo polarizado: las Elecciones Autonómicas y Municipales de Madrid (2012, April, 15th). Publicaciones de Antón Castromil, Departamento de Sociología VI, Universidad Complutense [Online]. URL: [http://www.ucm.es/info/socvi/castromil/datos/publicaciones/paper ACOP_08.pdf](http://www.ucm.es/info/socvi/castromil/datos/publicaciones/paper_ACOP_08.pdf)

DADER, José Luis & CHENG, Lifen (2011): Análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo de las web de los partidos. Ciber campaña. Cauces y diques para la participación: Las Elecciones Generales de 2008 y su proyección tecnopolítica. SAMPEDRO, Víctor (coord.), First ed., Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2011, p. 129-145.

FRELON, Deen. Analyzing online political discussion using three models of democratic communication. *New Media & Society*, 2010, vol. 12, No 7, p. 1172-1190.

HALLIN, Daniel & MANCINI, Paolo: *Sistemas mediáticos comparados: tres modelos de relación entre los medios de comunicación y la política*. First ed. Barcelona: Hacer, 2008. 298 p.

PRECHT, Richar David: *Die Kunst kein Egoist zu sein: Warum wir gerne gut sein wollen und was uns davon abhält*. First ed. München: Goldman Verlag, 2010.

RUIZ, Carlos; PERE MASIP, Josep Lluís; DÍAZ-NOCI & DOMINGO, David. *Conversación 2.0. y democracia: Análisis de los comentarios de los lectores en la prensa digital catalana*. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 2010, No 2, p. 7-39.

SAMPEDRO, Víctor & SEOANE, Francisco: *Las elecciones generales españolas de 2008: 'bipolarización antagónica' fomentada por intereses político-mediáticos y las nuevas tecnologías*. *Revista de Sociología y Política*, 2009, No 34, p. 129-135.

SUNSTEIN, Cass: *Republic 2.0*. First ed. Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press, 2007. 251p.