

# Third-order election. Spanish political parties' communication on *Facebook* during the 2019 *European Parliament* election campaign

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## Abstract

The 2019 *European Parliament* elections were held in Spain in a context of political fragmentation and polarisation, following the recent incorporation of the extreme right into the national parliament. Elections to the *European Parliament* are considered second-order elections and are sometimes used by citizens to cast a punishment vote, favouring new political actors of a contestatory character to gain visibility. Social media networks such as *Facebook* play an important role because they offer these parties a space where they can disseminate their messages on equal terms, beyond media control. This study conducts a content analysis of the posts published on *Facebook* by Spanish national political parties in the month prior to the 2019 local, regional and European elections. The main goal is to analyse the communication strategy used by Spanish political parties in this social media, in order to find out the importance given by the parties to the European elections and whether there are differences in strategy at each level. The results reveal that the European elections are a third-order election for Spanish parties, behind local elections. Most parties practice a dual campaign, in which the topics, goals and emotions posted on *Facebook* vary according to the political level at which they are targeted. This tendency is more pronounced in populist parties and seems to be shaped by the national political context and aimed at matching the concerns of Spaniards at the European level. Despite the incorporation of the extreme right into the Spanish political chessboard, the negative Eurosceptic discourse is only present in the two populist parties and does not affect the rest of the political forces.

## Keywords

Political communication; *Facebook*; *European Parliament* election; Populism; Online mobilization; Negative campaigning.

## 1. Introduction

The 2019 *European Parliament* (EP) election took place in Spain in an unusual context of political fragmentation and polarisation. Just a month before, an early general election had been held in the country, the third in four years, something unprecedented in the recent history of Spanish democracy. The foundations of this situation were the political management of the economic crisis as well as the continuing corruption scandals and the territorial problem with Catalonia.

The parliamentary instability began after the December 2015 general election with two new parties entering the Spanish parliament: the populist left-wing *Podemos* (We can) and the liberal *Ciudadanos* (Citizens, C's). For decades, the two major parties, the social-democrat *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, *PSOE*) and the conservative *Partido Popular* (People's Party, *PP*), had alternated in power, either by winning by absolute majority

or through pacts with regional parties. The fragmentation and polarisation of the political scene has been accentuated since April 2019 by the entry into Spanish parliament of the far-right populist *Vox*, achieving 10% of the vote in the national election.

The entry of extremist and populist parties into the parliamentary arena diminishes the quality of public debate in a society and endangers democracy. When populist voices gain prominence, their communication strategy is often used by non-populists' politicians and overflows into the general political discourse (**Mazzoleni; Bracciale**, 2018). This circumstance is especially dangerous if it ends up influencing the configuration of supranational political bodies such as the European Union (EU) since some voters use European elections to voice their dissatisfaction with the government's performance at the national level (**Weber**, 2007) and the impact of ideology on their electoral choice is bigger (**Sanz**, 2008). In this sense, *EP* elections have traditionally been the perfect platform for small or new political parties to gain visibility (**Skrinis; Teperoglou**, 2008). For instance, the 2014 *EP* election was the springboard into the Spanish political arena for *Podemos* which got five members of the *European Parliament* (MEPs) just four months after the party was founded.

Several studies point to the rise of social media as a further element that negatively influences the quality of democracies (**Tucker et al.**, 2018). These channels are used as a tool to polarise public discourse, undermine institutional legitimacy and destabilise elections (**Bennett; Livingston**, 2018; *European Commission*, 2016). Spaniards' news habits have become digital and the main source of news for citizens is online (78%), including social media (**Newman et al.**, 2021). According to the 2021 *Digital News Report*, *Facebook* is still the most used social media for news consumption in Spain (**Newman et al.**, 2021). The new political parties were, precisely, the most popular among the users of this platform in the studies carried out during the 2015 (**Gamir-Ríos; Cano-Orón; Calvo**, 2017), 2016 (**Fenoll; Hassler**, 2019) and 2019 Spanish elections (**Gamir-Ríos; Fenoll; Iranzo-Cabrera**, 2021).

In this context, political communication in *Facebook* could play an important role, equalising the electoral game by offering a channel that allows new political actors to spread their messages bypassing the media and network directly with the citizenry (**Kelm**, 2020). The study of the parties' strategies in this channel is therefore relevant, especially when the 2019 *EP* election campaign in Spain overlapped with local and regional elections. During the previous weeks to the election day, parties had to campaign for local candidates, but also for European ones. Thus, the analysis of this period allows us to observe the strategies followed by the parties in a multi-level electoral competition, in order to determine the relevance they attach to each campaign and to establish the specificities in the populist parties' communication.

## 2. Campaign strategies

The coincidence of several election campaigns crossing paths in May 2019 makes the political levels addressed in the *Facebook* posts an interesting object of study. *EP* elections in Spain are conceived as second-order elections by citizens as well as by media outlets and political parties (**Berganza**, 2008). Spaniards consider that domestic issues (61%) have more influence than topics related to the EU (12%) when it comes to cast one's vote in *EP* elections (*CIS*, 2019b). This lack of interest in Europe is reflected in a 17% lower turnout than in the national elections.

The secondary role of *EP* elections is also reflected in other European countries (**De-Vreese**, 2009) and some authors have even classified it as third-order elections, to point out its subordinate role in voters (**Reif**, 1997; 1984) and media coverage (**Wilke; Leidecker-Sandmann**, 2013), compared to national and regional/local elections. Since there are no studies to identify the importance given by Spanish parties to each political level in campaign, the first research question asks:

Which political level do parties focus on (RQ1)?

In order to analyse the differences in party strategies at each level, it is necessary to focus on the topics that political actors choose to address in the messages they post on *Facebook*. According to the issue ownership approach, some parties are considered by the public as being more able to deal with certain issues (**Walgrave; Tresch; Lefevere**, 2015). Voters are generally more likely to support a political actor if is perceived to be the most competent on a salient issue (**Bélanger; Meguid**, 2008). Thus, political parties and candidates emphasize issues on which voters associate their policy position in order to be consistent with their expectations (**Petrocik**, 1996).

For example, Conservative parties are typically assumed to handle issues such as taxes (**Bélanger; Meguid**, 2008; **Petrocik**, 1996), security (**Ansolabehere; Iyengar**, 1994) and defence (**Petrocik**, 1996) better than other parties. Right-wing populist parties are particularly associated with taking a stance on issues such as migration, refugees, crimes of immigrants and political radicalism (**Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés**, 2018; **Taggart**, 2000). In the case of progressive parties, voters relate them to better management of labour (**Ansolabehere; Iyengar** 1994), social issues (**Bélanger; Meguid**, 2008) and welfare (**Petrocik**, 1996). Left-wing populist parties are more inclined to comment on matters related to corruption and democratic regeneration (**Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés**, 2018). And we expect Green parties to own environmental issues such as climate change and global warming (**Walgrave et al.**, 2015).

Although party constituency ownership of an issue tends to be stable, it can occasionally fluctuate and change with existing national conditions (**Petrocik**, 1996) especially when issue owners are electorally successful and ideologically close (**Spoon et al.**, 2014). In addition, newer and challenging parties have a sharper issue profile than older parties (**Walgrave;**

De-Swert, 2007), especially populists (Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2018), and mainstream parties can adopt the policies of populist parties to draw voters back (Van-Spanje, 2018). Thus, we want to find out whether there are any differences regarding parties' issue ownership according to the level their messages are addressed to:

Are there differences in the topics based on the political level (RQ2)?

As Magin *et al.* point out (2017), information, interaction and mobilisation are three key election campaign functions to helping political actors extend their reach to supporters and voters. Information is probably the most basic function of election campaigns, also on Facebook (Magin *et al.*, 2021). Parties can also use Facebook to seek interaction with users. Through tools such as commenting, parties can ask users for feedback, which may provide them valuable information for their campaign strategies. In addition to informing and interacting with users, Facebook allows parties to mobilise their followers to actively spread their messages. For example, when they ask their supporters to share a message or when they request them to like a post to increase the visibility and reach of the party campaign without any extra costs. Parties can also use direct elements of mobilisation, such as asking users to vote for them in elections. Given that the parties devote lower campaign budget in EP elections (Petithomme, 2012), Facebook campaigning offers them a less expensive mobilisation tool.

However, despite the potential to interact with and mobilise users, Facebook is mainly used for top-down communication in election campaigns (Ceron, 2017; Magin *et al.*, 2021). Since there are no studies on focusing on the analysis of this trend at different levels in Spain, the third research question asks:

Are there differences in the use of Facebook to inform, mobilise and interact with users based on the political level (RQ3)?

Other goal of this study is to find out whether the rise of populist parties influences the discourse used by the rest of parties and affects their strategic use of emotions at all three political levels. Populist ideology and emotions are being increasingly adopted by political actors as communicative strategy to drive attention and gain success (Engesser; Fawzi; Larsson, 2017), particularly in social media platforms (Ernst *et al.*, 2019). This trend also affects EP elections campaign. The populist style was present in almost one third of the communication made via Facebook by political parties in 2014 (31%) (Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2018) and 2019 EP election campaigns (27%) (Lilleker; Balaban, 2021). This is a problem for democracy because the virality associated with social media enhances the visibility of populist discourse through a strong interconnected networks of citizens that directly participate in the dissemination of these ideas (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2020).

The use of emotional language and frequent appeals to emotions is one of the most important features associated with populist communication (Alvares; Dahlgren, 2016). We find positive emotions in the posts of left-wing populist parties as Podemos in Spain (Sampietro; Valera-Ordaz, 2015) or right-wing ones as Lega in Italy (Martella; Bracciale, 2021). However, most of the emotions used by populist parties in social media are negative, especially in the discourse of far-right politicians (Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Bucy *et al.*, 2020; Engesser *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, Eurosceptic discourse is also an identity element of the rhetoric of European populist parties, regardless of their ideology, presenting a negative discourse on social media against the EU (Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Nevertheless, the type of attack differs depending on ideology: right-wing populists pose a *hard* Euroscepticism, based on the loss of national sovereignty and the exclusion of out-groups, whereas the left-wing populists present a *soft* Euroscepticism, that criticises austerity policies promoted by the EP and appeals to the foundational values of EU (Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

In spite of the fact that a large number of studies focus on this issue, there are no cases that analyse if differences exist in the type of emotions used at European or local level. To address this gap in knowledge, this study raises the fourth research question:

Are there differences in the use of emotions based on the political level (RQ4)?

### 3. Method

To analyse the parties' strategies on Facebook during the 2019 EP election campaign, all posts published by the Spanish national political parties that gained representation in the 2019 EP election on May the 26<sup>th</sup> were collected during the month prior. Due to the lack of activity on the Facebook page of the left-wing coalition *Unidas Podemos* during the election campaign, the analysis focuses on the posts published by *Podemos*, the party that leads the coalition.

The posts were collected daily using the tool *Facepager* that accesses post attributes via Facebook's API (Jünger; Keyling, 2019). The process was carried out by a team of researchers from the *Ludwig Maximilians University* Munich led by Dr Jörg Haßler. The collection was manually verified by cross-checking the collected posts with the posts available on the parties' Facebook pages for the first and last date of the investigation period. Altogether, 844 Facebook posts were stored.

The study follows a quantitative methodology of content analysis of the Facebook posts. The coding scheme used was designed by the *CamforS* research group for the simultaneous study of the 2019 EP election in 12 EU countries (Haßler *et*

al., 2021). Manual coding comprised all elements of the *Facebook* posts, including visual elements such as pictures and the first minute of videos. To ensure the reliability of the manual coding, a random sample of 50 posts from European parties or parliamentary groups were coded (e.g., *Party of European Socialists* or *European People's Party*). These *Facebook* posts were coded by 29 coders (one to five coders per country) on the basis of the above-described joint coding scheme. The coders were trained in their country. These 50 posts were in English, and no country-specific knowledge was required so that each coder was able to code them. Reliability was calculated using the R-package *Tidycomm* (Unkel, 2019). The reliability test showed a common understanding of the categories (all Holsti's  $CR \geq 0.7$ ). The detailed reliability values can be found in the full coding scheme. See [https://bit.ly/CamforS\\_OSF](https://bit.ly/CamforS_OSF)

In order to answer RQ1 and find out on which political level parties focus on, we coded the political level that the topics of the post refer to or are mainly related to: local/regional level, national level, EU level and other levels (e.g., bilateral relations between countries, global).

To find out what topics were addressed by the parties at each political level (RQ2), the content of the post was classified according to whether it is related to three overarching subject areas: *polity* contains institutional and normative aspects of politics such as the state of democracy or the territorial design; *politics* includes processual aspects of politics such as the electoral campaign, results from polls or provided information about the election day; and *policy* are political issues that politics is dealing with and that are subjects of political debates. This includes the subcategories economy and finance, labour and social issues, criminality/crime rate in general, political radicalism/religious fanaticism, immigration policy in general (including distribution of refugees within the EU member states, measures against refugees in Europe, crimes of asylum seekers, refugees or other immigrants), domestic issues as corruption, and environmental and energy policy. These topics were the main concerns of Spaniards in the spring of 2019 (CIS, 2019; European Commission, 2019).

The categories *information elements*, *call for interaction* and *call for mobilisation* were operationalised to measure the main function of the post:

- 1) Information elements differentiated subcategories for *information on party*, *information on party's candidates* and *information on party's policy*.
- 2) Call for interaction differentiated between online and offline interaction. *Calls for interaction online* were coded when posts contained a call to comment on a post, a call to take a vote by using *Facebook* reactions or a call to address a political actor. *Calls for interaction offline* included calls to build new or strengthen already-existing local political relationships and calls to address a political actor personally, by letter or over the phone.
- 3) Calls for mobilisation were also subdivided into online and offline. *Calls for online mobilisation* included appeals such as calls to share a post or calls to sign an online petition or to participate in an online survey. On the other hand, *calls for offline mobilisation* were coded when posts contained appeals such as calls to go to vote, calls to door-to-door canvassing or calls to join a party.

Finally, we analysed the content of the posts to determine whether there are differences in the use of emotions according to the political sphere to which the post is addressed (RQ4). Based on previous research on emotions, social media and political communication, we coded the presence of positive and negative emotions as dichotomous variables (Alvares; Dahlgren, 2016; Bene, 2017; Hameleers et al., 2016; Engesser; Fawzi; Larsson, 2017; Martella; Bracciale, 2021; Sampietro; Valera-Ordaz, 2015). Following Ernst et al. (2019), a post is positive if it uses emotional language by expressing happiness, hope, pride or trust. And a post is negative if it contains anger, uneasiness, sadness or fear. Subsequently, the emotion of the posts was recoded as neutral (no emotion), only positive, only negative and both emotions.

#### 4. Results

The results of the study reveal a preference of Spanish political parties for the national (44%) and local/regional (37%) levels, well above the European level, which barely reaches a sixth of the published posts (16.5%). However, if we look at Table 1, we observe statistically significant discrepancies between the campaign strategies of the different parties [ $\chi^2(12, N = 844) = 98.11, p < .001$ ].

In the month leading up to the European and local elections, the two centre-right parties (*C's* and *PP*) maintained a struggle to consolidate the conservative voter leadership in city and regional governments. Both parties focused their campaign mainly on the local level: the conservative *PP* devoted 56.5% of its publications and the liberal *C's* 50%. In contrast, *Vox* is the party that gave the least attention to the local level, making evident the newcomer's lack of structure at this level. The far-right party focused mainly on the national level (57.9%), emphasising the party's commitment to putting Spain and national issues at the forefront.

“ The 2019 EP election in Spain was considered a third-order election in the shadow of the municipal and regional elections ”

Table 1. Political levels per party

|       |                |                | Party          |             |            |           |            | Total |     |
|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|-----|
|       |                |                | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> |       |     |
| Level | Local          | Count          | 49             | 76          | 58         | 104       | 23         | 310   |     |
|       |                | % within party | 26%**          | 31%**       | 50%*       | 56,5%*    | 20%**      | 37%   |     |
|       | National       | Count          | 92             | 126         | 34         | 57        | 66         | 375   |     |
|       |                | % within party | 49%            | 52%*        | 29%**      | 31%**     | 58%*       | 44%   |     |
|       | EU             | Count          | 45             | 38          | 23         | 12        | 21         | 139   |     |
|       |                | % within party | 24%*           | 16%         | 19,7%      | 6,5%**    | 18%        | 16,5% |     |
|       | Other          | Count          | 1              | 2           | 2          | 11        | 4          | 20    |     |
|       |                | % within party | 0,5%           | 0,8%        | 2%         | 6%**      | 3,5%       | 2%    |     |
|       | Total          |                | Count          | 187         | 242        | 117       | 184        | 114   | 844 |
|       | % within party |                | 100%           | 100%        | 100%       | 100%      | 100%       |       |     |

Notes: 4 cells (20%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.70. The parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

Also significant is the high percentage of posts that the socialist *PSOE* dedicated to national politics (52%). This strategy seems to be aimed at amortising the victory in the national elections of April the 26<sup>th</sup> and extending this success to the local and European elections. *Podemos* was the only party to use a significantly more European strategy. The left-wing populist party addressed 24% of its messages to the European level. The tendency to consider the *EP* as a third-order election is also present in this party although to a lesser extent. It is also significant the scarce attention that the *PP* devoted to the *EP* election, only 6.5% of its posts.

References to other political levels are practically marginal in all parties except the *PP* (6%). This party stands out for including a significant number of references to Venezuela in its political communication. Although the situation in this country has nothing to do with the local or European elections in Spain, the conservative parties use it to attack *Podemos* for its alleged links to the Bolivarian government (López-García, 2016).

For a better overview of the campaign strategy used at the European level, in the rest of the study only two levels are differentiated: EU and non-EU. The analysis of the issues used by the parties at each level makes it possible to establish whether they followed the same strategy or whether they used a differentiated approach for the European level.

Table 2 and 3 show how strongly the posts of the Spanish parties focused in each level on the three dimensions of politics: politics, policy and polity. In both campaigns, most parties organised their communication strategy around politics-related issues and used *Facebook* mainly to promote themselves. This trend is stronger in the two left-wing parties, who were keen to share information about campaigning and election contest and published a remarkable number of posts using a game frame approach.

Programmatic campaigning related to specific policy issues were relegated to second place at both levels. However, if we focus on publications at the European level, although fewer in number, they reveal a more policy-focused campaign.

Table 2. Percentage of topics at EU level by party (% within party)

|                        | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> | Total |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Politics               | 76             | 87*         | 56.5       | 58        | 52**       | 70.5  |
| Game frame             | 36             | 53*         | 4**        | 17        | 29         | 32    |
| Policy total           | 64             | 58          | 43.5       | 67        | 76         | 61    |
| Labour and social      | 47             | 53*         | 22         | 50        | 5**        | 38    |
| Environmental          | 33*            | 18          | 9          | 25        | 5          | 20    |
| Immigration in general | 24             | 10.5        | 4          | 17        | 33*        | 18    |
| Economy and finance    | 20             | 3**         | 4          | 42*       | 24         | 15    |
| Radicalism/fanaticism  | 16             | 0**         | 9          | 42*       | 9.5        | 11.5  |
| Criminality in general | 0              | 0           | 0          | 8*        | 5          | 1     |
| Crimes of immigrants   | 0              | 0           | 0          | 0         | 9.5*       | 1     |
| Polity                 | 9              | 5           | 4          | 0         | 52*        | 13    |

Notes: N = 139 posts. More than one topic could be coded per post. The parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

Looking at the general concerns of Spaniards in the spring of 2019 (*European Commission, 2019*), the most important issues facing the EU were immigration (37%), economic situation (23%), climate change (21%), unemployment (18%) and terrorism (15%).

However, the Spanish parties' 2019 EP election campaign at European level focused mainly on labour, social and environment issues, leaving topics such as immigration or economy on the back burner.

The parties on the extremes turned more frequently to policy issues, while the incumbent party (*PSOE*) stood out for the opposite, especially at the local level, focusing almost exclusively on the procedural aspects of politics and avoiding pronouncements on controversial polity or domestic policy issues. *Podemos* and *Vox* were keen to promote the topics mainly 'owned' by them in line with the issue ownership approach. *Podemos* led the use of environmental issues and was the only party that significantly addressed this topic at local level. Likewise, albeit in a more moderate way than in previous elections, *Podemos* led the fight against corruption, a recurring theme in the discourse of the new parties. At the other ideological extreme of the Spanish political chessboard, *Vox* was particularly keen to provide information on immigration, being the only party to link immigration with crime.

The main parties also dealt mainly with the issues that are supposed to own. The ruling party led the use of labour and social issues. On the other hand, the main conservative party (*PP*) monopolised economic issues (at both levels) and led references to criminality (at EU level). As for *C's*, although most of his publications on policy were focused on labour and social issues, it is striking that it is the only party that did not stand out in the 'ownership' of any issue, possibly as a strategy to emphasise the centrist nature of the party.

When looking at the concerns of Spaniards at national level during the 2019 EP election campaign (*European Commission, 2019*), we found some differences. The most important issues facing Spain were unemployment (51%), pensions (22%), economic situation (21%), immigration (16%) and health and Social Security (15%). These issues are in line with Spanish national surveys (*CIS, 2019*), which also reflect a strong concern for unemployment (65%) and the economy (26%) as well as usual issues on the agenda of the new parties such as problems of politicians in general (28%), corruption (26%) and the independence of Catalonia (11%).

The *Facebook* election campaign of the political parties at local level reflected these concerns (Table 3), also prioritising labour, social and economic issues. It is worth noting that the immigration debate occupied a residual space on the agenda of the majority of parties. Only *Vox* incorporated this issue in its local campaign, although to a lesser extent than it did at the European level.

Table 3. Percentage of topics at no EU level by party

|                        | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> | Total |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Politics               | 75*            | 72.5*       | 45**       | 62        | 54**       | 64    |
| Game frame             | 41.5*          | 43*         | 11**       | 23**      | 21.5**     | 31    |
| Policy total           | 59*            | 30**        | 57         | 55        | 63*        | 50    |
| Labour and social      | 49*            | 26          | 15**       | 33        | 9**        | 28.5  |
| Economy and finance    | 15.5           | 1**         | 16         | 20*       | 11         | 12    |
| Radicalism/fanaticism  | 3              | 0.5**       | 11*        | 6         | 13*        | 5     |
| Environmental          | 15.5*          | 2.5         | 1          | 1**       | 1          | 4     |
| Corruption             | 6*             | 2.5         | 2          | 0.6       | 2          | 3     |
| Immigration in general | 0.7            | 0.5         | 0          | 0         | 12*        | 2     |
| Crimes of immigrants   | 0              | 0           | 0          | 0         | 7.5*       | 1     |
| Criminality in general | 0              | 0           | 0          | 0         | 3*         | 0.4   |
| Polity                 | 6              | 3**         | 7          | 4**       | 32*        | 8     |

Notes:  $N = 705$  posts. More than one topic could be coded per post. The parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

When examining the polity-related issues addressed in the posts, it can be stated that the institutional and normative aspects of politics played a neglectable role and were hardly present in the *Facebook* election campaign of all parties except *Vox*. The subject of politics was one of the main axes of the far-right populist party's communication at both levels, with criticism of the constitutional political structures and the normative foundation of the political. Nevertheless, this strategy was accentuated at the European level, where polity issues were present in every second post, while at the local level they accounted for a third of *Vox's* publications.

Tables 4 and 5 show how strongly the Spanish parties focus in each level on the three main functions of campaigning: information, interaction and mobilisation. At both levels, there is a clear tendency to use *Facebook* primarily as a top-down channel for information dissemination. A closer examination of the nature of the information at each level shows that in the publica-

tions devoted to reporting on the European campaign there was a higher percentage of posts focusing on information about the party's own policies (44%), such as parties' manifesto or government program. Information about the own party (39%) or its candidates (17%) took a secondary position in *Facebook* posts at this level. By contrast, in the communication strategy followed at the local elections, information about the party occupied a relevant position (53%). Although the percentage of posts with information on party representatives was low on both levels, the party's own politicians had slightly more visibility in the local and regional election campaign (20% of all posts) than the candidates campaigning for the *EP* election (17%).

Nevertheless, beyond this general trend, we can observe differentiated strategies depending on ideology. The percentage of posts with information about the own party was significantly higher for left-wing parties, especially the *PSOE*. Moreover, the incumbent *PSOE* followed a different strategy from the other parties in promoting its candidates. At the local level, it led in publications about its politicians, while in the European campaign it was the party that publicised the least its candidate, who had a marginal presence in the percentage of the *PSOE*'s posts (5%).

There are also major ideological differences in the parties' strategies in reporting their electoral programmes at both levels. In the European campaign, policy proposals were more abundant in the more conservative and extreme parties, while parties closer to the centre offered information with a lower programmatic profile. In contrast, the local election campaign on *Facebook* was characterised by a significant decrease in posts with information about the electoral manifesto for all parties, except for *C's*, which led in policy information.

Table 4. Percentage of posts containing information, interaction and mobilisation elements at EU level

|                      | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> | Total |
|----------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Information total    | 100            | 100         | 100        | 100       | 100        | 100   |
| On party             | 38             | 58*         | 26         | 25        | 29         | 39    |
| On candidates        | 22             | 5**         | 26         | 25        | 14         | 17    |
| On party policy      | 44             | 40          | 35         | 50        | 57         | 44    |
| Interaction total    | 0              | 0           | 4*         | 0         | 0          | 0.7   |
| Online interaction   | 0              | 0           | 4*         | 0         | 0          | 0.7   |
| Offline interaction  | 0              | 0           | 0          | 0         | 0          | 0     |
| Mobilisation total   | 60             | 78*         | 30**       | 25**      | 38         | 54    |
| Online mobilisation  | 24*            | 13          | 9          | 0         | 5          | 14    |
| Offline mobilisation | 44             | 76*         | 26**       | 25        | 33         | 47    |

Note:  $N = 139$  posts. More than one item could be coded. The parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

Appeals for interaction remained outside the campaign strategy of most parties, except for the new parties *Podemos* and *C's*, which used them, albeit marginally. It is noteworthy that there were no calls for offline interaction at all. Concerning calls for mobilisation, more use was detected at the European level (54% of all posts), perhaps to compensate for the lack of resources usually allocated to this campaign. Spanish parties focused at both levels much more strongly on offline than online mobilisation (see Table 4 and 5). The mobilisation strategy was significantly more present in the discourse of the governing party, which leads at both levels calls for offline mobilisation (e.g., go to vote). At the European level, *Podemos* was the only party that most strongly encouraged calls for online mobilisation (24% of its posts), especially to engage users to share a post, to follow an election event live on *Facebook* or to read an online news item about its candidate.

Table 5. Percentage of posts containing information, interaction and mobilisation elements at no EU level

|                      | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> | Total |
|----------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Information total    | 100            | 96**        | 99         | 99        | 100        | 98    |
| On party             | 62*            | 59*         | 37**       | 46**      | 55         | 53    |
| On candidates        | 13**           | 27*         | 12**       | 23        | 20         | 20    |
| On party policy      | 24             | 9**         | 36*        | 27        | 29         | 23    |
| Interaction total    | 2*             | 0           | 0          | 0         | 0          | 0.4   |
| Online interaction   | 2*             | 0           | 0          | 0         | 0          | 0.4   |
| Offline interaction  | 0              | 0           | 0          | 0         | 0          | 0     |
| Mobilisation total   | 39             | 60*         | 33         | 34**      | 25**       | 41    |
| Online mobilisation  | 9              | 10          | 3**        | 10        | 6.5        | 8.5   |
| Offline mobilisation | 34.5           | 57*         | 30         | 27**      | 24**       | 37    |

Note:  $N = 705$  posts. More than one item could be coded. The parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

To verify whether there are differences at the European level in the use of emotions during the election campaign on *Facebook*, we coded every post for the presence of positive and negative sentiments (Tables 6 and 7). In general, the right-wing bloc, led by the *PP*, focused its negative campaign on the ruling party (*PSOE*). They also targeted their attacks against those they denounce as the *PSOE*'s secret allies: *Podemos* and the nationalist and pro-independence parties. Within the right-wing bloc, the conservative *PP* used negative emotions towards the liberal *C's* and the far-right populist party *Vox*. While *C's* avoided confrontation with the other right-wing parties and aimed its attack almost exclusively at the Catalan separatist and the left-wing bloc.

“ The far-right party focused mainly on the national level, emphasising the party's commitment to putting Spain and national issues at the forefront ”

A different use of negative emotions can also be observed in the left-wing parties. The *PSOE* eschewed direct confrontation with *Podemos* and concentrated its negative emotions on denouncing the whole right-wing bloc, especially *Vox* and the major conservative party (*PP*). These attacks appeal to the fear that the extreme right could come to govern through pacts with the other conservative parties. *Podemos* focused its negativity on the main conservative party (*PP*), leaving attacks on *C's* and *PSOE* in the background and with hardly any negative mentions to *Vox*. Thus, it seems that only the new parties already established in the institutions (*Podemos* and *C's*) were keen to ignore the newcomer *Vox*.

Table 6. Percentage of posts containing emotions at EU level

|               | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> | Total |
|---------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Neutral       | 38*            | 18          | 35         | 0**       | 14         | 25    |
| Only positive | 22**           | 63*         | 39         | 42        | 19         | 37    |
| Only negative | 13             | 0**         | 0          | 8         | 38*        | 11    |
| Both emotions | 27             | 18          | 26         | 50*       | 29         | 27    |

Note: *N* = 139 posts. Parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

The findings reveal a more emotionally neutral European campaign, while at the local level the use of emotions is increasing. Taking a closer look at no EU level, Table 7 shows an ideological cleavage in the use of emotions. Left-wing parties published more neutral and positive posts. While right-wing parties used more negative emotions in their messages.

Table 7. Percentage of posts containing emotions at no EU level

|               | <i>Podemos</i> | <i>PSOE</i> | <i>C's</i> | <i>PP</i> | <i>Vox</i> | Total |
|---------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------|
| Neutral       | 28*            | 20          | 21         | 7**       | 10**       | 17    |
| Only positive | 37             | 61*         | 27**       | 44        | 28**       | 43    |
| Only negative | 15.5           | 1**         | 16         | 8         | 35.5*      | 12    |
| Both emotions | 19**           | 18**        | 36*        | 41*       | 27         | 27    |

Note: *N* = 705 posts. Parties are ordered from left wing to right wing regarding their ideological stance.

\* Adjusted residuals greater than + 2.

\*\* Adjusted residuals lower than - 2.

A party-by-party analysis shows that *Podemos* was the most neutral campaigner at both levels, albeit more pronounced at the European level (38% of its posts), maintaining the same level of neutrality as in the 2014 *EP* election campaign (Sampietro; Valera-Ordaz, 2015). However, unlike in previous elections at national (Fenoll; Cano-Orón, 2019; Fenoll; Hassler, 2019) or European level (Sampietro; Valera-Ordaz, 2015), *Podemos* was no longer so strongly committed to positive emotions, although they were still the most widely used.

The *PSOE*'s strategy at both levels was similar, standing out for its extensive use of positive emotions. Examples of this positive campaign are the incorporation of a heart in the party logo (replacing the traditional rose) or the 2019 *EP* election slogan *#LaEuropaQueQuieres* (The Europe You Want/Love), with a campaign full of positive emotions towards the EU. The ruling party's positive campaign seems to be aimed at counteracting the negative campaigning of the three right-wing opposition parties.

The struggle for right-wing hegemony, following the arrival of *Vox*, reveals differentiated individual strategies at each level. *C's* offered a more moderate profile at the European level, with a high percentage of posts with positive (towards the EU) and neutral content. By contrast, in the local arena, *C's* was the party that use the least positive emotions and the second party, after *Vox*, that published the most negative emotions. A very different strategy to previous elections, where *C's* had been the party with the lowest number of negative emotions (Fenoll; Cano-Orón,

“ The parties on the extremes turned more frequently to policy issues, while the incumbent party (*PSOE*) stood out for the opposite ”

2019). The targets of these negative emotions were the ruling socialist party, its potential ally in government (*Podemos*) and the Catalan separatist.

The *PP*, however, implements the same strategy. The Conservative party excelled in publishing a significantly higher percentage of posts with emotional content at both levels. Positive sentiments were mainly directed towards the party itself and also towards the EU, while negative emotions focused on the ruling party (*PSOE*), demonising its alleged links with terrorists and separatist parties.

The extreme right-wing populist party *Vox* is the only party that used more negative emotions than positive ones. This strategy is present at both levels, with almost two out of every three posts containing negative emotions. At local level, *Vox*'s attacks were focused on all parties, including the centre-right wing parties. However, the socialist party and the nationalist and pro-independence parties were the most targeted by the negative campaign.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The simultaneous elections held in Spain on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2019 at local, regional and European level offer an ideal scenario to see what differences exist in the political communication of the parties. The results obtained allow us to detect several original contributions regarding Spanish parties' strategies at each level.

In the first place, our findings clearly indicate that the 2019 *EP* election in Spain was considered a third-order election in the shadow of the municipal and regional elections held on the same day. This trend is less pronounced in populist parties, partly because they are structurally less established at the local level and because of the benefits that good election results in Europe bring to small parties, increasing their visibility and media impact (**Fenoll; Rodríguez-Ballesteros, 2016**). But especially because their core campaign issues are related to the main concerns at the European level. This subordinate role of the *EP* election—present in the priorities of political parties—has also been noted in voter attitudes (**Reif, 1997, 1984**) and media coverage (**Wilke; Leidecker-Sandmann, 2013**), and highlights the need to implement changes at the European level in order to achieve greater involvement of society in EU politics.

The study also provides important insights into the communication strategies used by political parties in a multilevel electoral arena. The findings reveal to a large extent that the focus of the *Facebook* campaign was in line with the issue ownership approach (**Petrocik, 1996**), especially at local level. However, all parties seem to adapt to citizens' concerns at the European level, highlighting issues related to the environment or immigration, which rank higher in polls at this level. The two populist parties were, therefore, in the lead on these issues at both levels: *Podemos* on the environment and *Vox* on the immigration. In this sense, the main conservative party incorporates the immigration issue in a substantial way at the European level. Thus, the impact of the electoral lift-off of the radical populist right in Spain can also be seen on the discourse on immigration of the opposition parties, as has already happened in other European countries (**Van-Spanje, 2018, 2010**).

Despite the fact that corruption still ranked high in Spaniards concerns in spring 2019 (**CIS, 2019**), the new parties no longer used the subject of democratic regeneration with the same intensity as they did in the past (**Valera-Ordaz et al., 2017**), when they were still extra-parliamentary parties. *Podemos* and *C's* reluctance to keep denouncing corruption may be motivated by the pragmatism of the new parties that have already entered the institutions. The contingency of reaching a pact after the elections might favoured a less belligerent attitude towards parties on the same ideological wing.

The results also point to some common trends. In general, parties prioritised politics and policy over polity, in line with a common pattern in election campaigns (**Magin, 2012**). The use of these three elements was, however, higher at EU level, possibly because of the need to concentrate more electoral information in a smaller number of posts. The thematic approach was significantly more intense in the two populist parties as previously detected in literature (**Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2018**) especially in the newest (**Walgrave; De-Swert, 2007**).

Regarding the strategies to inform, mobilise and interact with users, there was a general tendency to use *Facebook* primarily as a top-down channel for information dissemination. In the *EP* election campaign, the parties focused their information especially on programmatic aspects, while at the local level the parties themselves were the protagonists. Left-wing parties most frequently used *Facebook* to promote their campaign events (appearances in the media and in rallies) and to focus on 'horserace' aspects of politics, with information on polls and election results. This can be explained by the context of the period analysed, which started just after the general election and had against the background of the future system of alliances between both parties. Furthermore, *PSOE* could be interested in extending the bandwagon effect to local and European elections by amortising their favourable results in the recent national election. This high number of posts focused on processual aspects of politics is directly related to the proliferation in the number of electoral events, during the last elections held in Spain. In the 2019 election campaign, for example, electoral events were less crowded than in the past, but more frequent and numerous, in order to provide constant material to feed social media content (**Peris-Blanes et al., 2020**).

“ The impact of the electoral lift-off of the radical populist right in Spain can also be seen on the discourse on immigration of the opposition parties ”

Regarding mobilisation, there was greater use of this tool at the European level, perhaps to compensate for the lack of resources usually allocated to this campaign. Spanish parties use *Facebook* at both levels as a digital tool to encourage participation mainly in traditional offline campaign events. The socialist party published significantly more posts with such calls for mobilisation, repeating the same strategy as in the 2016 national election, when it was in opposition (Fenoll; Hassler, 2019). In contrast to other European countries, where the far-right populists lead the calls for online mobilisation on *Facebook* (Fenoll; Hassler, 2019), *Vox* stood out for the scarce use of this tool. Parties definitely do not use the interaction possibilities offered by *Facebook* at all. A priori, obtaining information through these tools would allow political actors to gain in-depth knowledge of users' opinions on certain issues. Nonetheless, parties would have to devote large amounts of resources to this task, moderating user participation and channelling the information received. The lack of interest showed by all parties in both election campaigns on *Facebook* reveals the under-resourcing of these teams.

“ There was a general tendency to use *Facebook* primarily as a top-down channel for information dissemination ”

The political situation in Spain during the election campaign influenced the parties' emotional strategy at both levels. The use of negative emotions was mainly projected towards the opposing bloc, although the battle for hegemony of the right-wing bloc was reflected in a greater number of attacks within the bloc by the *PP* and *Vox*. *C's* maintained a differentiated strategy and focused negative emotions exclusively on Catalan separatists and left-wing parties. Within the left-wing bloc, there is a less hostile attitude towards each other, especially from the incumbent party (*PSOE*), which excludes *Podemos*, its former ally in government, from its attacks. This strategy of mutual non-aggression was also followed by *Podemos* at the local level with a less aggressive attitude towards the *PSOE* than the other parties, while at the European level *Podemos* was just as belligerent towards the socialists as the right-wing parties.

In terms of the recipient of the emotions, there are two well-defined blocks. The more moderate parties (*PSOE*, *PP* and *C's*) used a positive campaign to refer to the EU and its institutions, but both populist parties (*Podemos* and *Vox*) criticised the EU with negative sentiments. These results are in line with other studies on social media, which point to the use of negative Eurosceptic discourse in European populist parties, regardless of their ideology (Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

In summary, the results of this study offer a first outline of the different communication strategies in a multilevel campaign held in Spain in a polarised and fragmented political scenario. Future studies should go further in this direction by incorporating other multiple electoral events in other EU countries, in order to determine whether the conclusions obtained in Spain can be generalised to the European level or whether they respond to a national conjuncture.

“ The more moderate parties (*PSOE*, *PP* and *C's*) used a positive campaign to refer to the EU and its institutions, but both populist parties (*Podemos* and *Vox*) criticised the EU with negative sentiments ”

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