

Representation of the main political leaders and propagandistic use of Instagram in Spain

Representación de los principales líderes políticos y uso propagandístico de Instagram en España

Representação dos principais líderes políticos e uso propagandístico do Instagram na Espanha

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ABSTRACT | The political use of social networking sites is a well-established field of research in media studies. Currently, Instagram is one of the fastest growing social networks and as a result of the importance it gives to images, it is a potential propaganda tool for the personalization of politics. This article performs a content analysis of 504 posts on Instagram by the leaders of the four main Spanish political parties (PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos and Podemos), focusing especially on the frequency of publication, and the content of the images and videos. The study covers from September 2 to December 2, 2018, including a non-electoral period and a regional electoral period. In general, results reveal a more frequent use of Instagram by traditional parties. In addition, there is also a predominance of the right-wing in terms of frequency of publication on Instagram. As to the content of the posts, on the one hand a pronounced individualization predominates (since party corporate symbols acquires a secondary role); on the other, there is a notorious absence of privatization, since leaders hardly appear in personal and private contexts. We conclude that there are no significant differences between the non-electoral and the electoral periods, although in the latter there is an increase of personalization and propaganda of affirmation.

KEYWORDS: political communication; propaganda; social media; Instagram; Spain; elections.

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RESUMEN | *El uso político de las redes sociales es un campo de investigación bien establecido en los estudios sobre comunicación. Actualmente, Instagram es una de las redes sociales de mayor crecimiento y gracias a la relevancia que concede a la imagen, es una potencial herramienta propagandística para la personalización de la política. Este artículo lleva a cabo un análisis de contenido de 504 publicaciones realizadas en Instagram por los líderes de los cuatro principales partidos políticos españoles (PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos y Podemos), centrándose especialmente en la frecuencia de publicación y en el contenido de las imágenes y vídeos. El estudio comprende desde el 2 de septiembre hasta el 2 de diciembre de 2018, incluyendo un período no-electoral y un período electoral autonómico en España. En general, los resultados revelan un mayor uso de Instagram por parte de los partidos tradicionales. Además, también se constata un predominio de la derecha en cuanto a frecuencia de publicación. Respecto del contenido de las publicaciones, predomina, por un lado, una acusada individualización (con la simbología partidista adquiriendo un carácter secundario) y, por otro, una ausencia de contextos personales y privados en la aparición de los líderes. La investigación concluye que no existen diferencias significativas entre el período no-electoral y el electoral en el uso político de Instagram, aunque en este último se da un aumento de la personalización y de la propaganda de afirmación.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *comunicación política; propaganda; redes sociales; Instagram; España; elecciones.*

RESUMO | *O uso das redes sociais na política é uma área de pesquisa bem estabelecida nos estudos sobre a comunicação. Na atualidade, o Instagram é uma das redes sociais que apresenta o maior crescimento, e devido à importância que dá à imagem, torna-se uma potente ferramenta de propaganda para a personalização da política. Este artigo realiza uma análise de conteúdo de 504 publicações feitas no Instagram pelos líderes dos quatro principais partidos políticos espanhóis (PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos e Podemos), centrando-se especialmente na frequência de publicação e no conteúdo das imagens e vídeos. O trabalho abrange desde o dia 2 de setembro até o dia 2 de dezembro de 2018, incluindo um período não eleitoral e um período eleitoral estadual na Espanha. De modo geral, os resultados revelam o maior uso do Instagram pelos partidos tradicionais. Também, verifica-se uma predominância da direita na frequência de publicações. Com relação ao conteúdo das publicações, prevalece, por um lado, uma acentuada individualização (com o simbolismo partidário adquirindo um carácter secundário), e por outro lado, uma falta de contextos pessoais e privados na aparição dos líderes. A pesquisa conclui que não existem diferenças significativas entre o período não eleitoral e o eleitoral no uso político do Instagram, ainda que nesse último nota-se um aumento da personalização e da propaganda de afirmação.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *comunicação política; propaganda; redes sociais; Instagram; Espanha; eleições.*

INTRODUCTION

The political use of social networks is a consolidated field of study in the domain of communication. Spain, with its leaders and parties strongly utilizing the Internet, is currently immersed in what Davis, Baumgartner, France, and Morris (2009) conceptualized as a third post-maturation phase in Internet campaigns. This phase follows an initial period of discovery (1992-1999) and a second where maturation is reached with the 2000 US campaign. In this third post-maturation phase, as of 2006, the use of sophisticated websites is normalized, and attention is directed to social networking sites or social networks. Anticipated by the Howard Dean campaign in 2004 (Wolf, 2004), the use of social networks became a relevant –even essential– resource, starting with Barack Obama’s 2007-2008 campaign (Towner & Dulio, 2012). This campaign was the preamble to the radical importance acquired by networks such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter, which have since been integrated into the usual arsenal of political communication at a global level. One example of the above is the systematic use that Donald Trump made of Twitter in his 2016 presidential campaign, that has continued during his mandate. In this regard, this work focuses on the propaganda use that Spanish political leaders make of social networks, specifically Instagram, one of the most used platforms currently, which has had a constant growth ever since it was launched. The research studies the profiles of the four main Spanish national leaders, both during a non-electoral period and during a regional electoral period: the elections to the Andalusian Parliament on December 2, 2018.

The analysis focuses on the type of context in which individual leaders are shown, the degree to which the political rival is represented, the link between the leaders’ communication with the corporate elements of their parties, and the extent to which the leaders of the *new politics* make a more relevant quantitative use of Instagram than those of traditional parties. This approach is related to some relevant issues in the state of the art of current online political communication, defined by the growing relevance of privatization and individualization (Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012), and by the evidence that the candidates’ figure are increasingly rooted in Instagram, although not their private contexts, not in the Spanish sphere (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2018; Marcos García & Alonso Muñoz, 2017; Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017; Verón Lassa & Pallarés Navarro, 2017), nor outside of it (Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016; Ekman & Widholm, 2017).

To conduct the study, we analyzed three months of activity on Instagram by the following leaders: Pedro Sánchez (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), Pablo Casado (Partido Popular), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos). This sampling results in a total of 504 posts, to which we applied a content analysis.

As we will see, the main results are in the same vein than previous research: Spanish leaders follow an individualization strategy on Instagram, but they are shown in predominantly professional contexts. This individualization is marked by the absence of corporate elements, as well as by the secondary importance given to political rivals. On the other hand, we found that traditional parties are the most active on Instagram.

Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the accumulated knowledge about the use of social networks in Spanish political communication, in a context of convulsion and rearticulation of the electoral map and, additionally, alleviate the scarcity of research on the use of Instagram in online Spanish political campaigns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social networks have been linked to phenomena such as the personalization of politics (Filimonov et al., 2016) and are, at the same time, a useful tool to create political propaganda oriented to *politainment* and the creation of celebrities (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019). Considering the voter's participation in these platforms, social networks become important when it comes to be close to the electorate, establishing an emotional connection. In this context, the candidate's *celebrification* and the star-politicians are linked to the consideration of these as individuals (Oliva, Pérez-Latorre, & Besalú, 2015) and, consequently, with *personalization*. Personalization has become an element related to the de-ideologization of politics in the field of infotainment programs (McAllister, 2007; Campus, 2010; Bennett, 2012; Adam & Maier, 2016), and it is present in mediated politics in social networks (López-Meri, Marcos-García, & Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Van Aelst et al. distinguish two forms of personalization: on the one hand, *individualization*, which implies "a focus on individual politicians as central actors in the political arena, including their ideas, capacities and policies" (2012, p. 204), leaving the party on the background; on the other hand, *privatization*, which means shifting the focus "from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, as a person distinct from their public role" (2012, p. 205). This private quality can be understood as a non-political personal feature or information from their private life (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Beyond the personalization factor, in Spain social networks have been welcomed as a key electoral tool (Caldevilla Domínguez, 2009). Particularly, the political use of Twitter –the network that has attracted the most attention from the academic community (Filimonov et al., 2016)– has been happening at least since 2010 (Congosto, 2015), and was established with the general elections in November 2011 (García Ortega & Zugasti Azagra, 2014), also being studied in the context of the European elections of 2014 (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez, & Pineda, 2018), the general elections

of 2015 (López-García, 2016; Said-Hung, Prati, & Cancino-Borbón, 2017), or those of 2016 (López-Meri et al., 2017), among other contexts (Fernández-Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla, & Sanz-Marcos, 2018). Previous research on Twitter has dealt with aspects such as the role of ideology when determining the degree of activity in this network; some authors have found a more or less similar activity between the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the Partido Popular (PP) (Criado, Martínez-Fuentes, & Silván, 2013), while others find greater activity on the part of the PSOE (Abejón, Sastre, & Linares 2012) and leftist forces (Ramos-Serrano et al., 2018), or lower activity by the PP (Cebrián Guinovart, Vázquez Barrio, & Olabarrieta Vallejo, 2013). Beyond Twitter, the literature offers data on the use of YouTube in Spain and the US in 2008 (Pineda, Garrido, & Ramos, 2013), or on Facebook and Spanish candidates in the 2016 elections (Puentes-Rivera, Rúas-Araújo, & Dapena-González, 2017). In summary, the Spanish panorama shows that “social networks [...] have become an essential axis of political communication towards citizens that is becoming more influential every day” (Ruiz del Olmo & Bustos Díaz, 2016, p. 120).

Nevertheless, Instagram must be added to the aforementioned networks, since it is becoming a relevant platform for the study of electoral campaigns (Filimonov et al., 2016). There is already some research on political strategies in this network (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017; Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017; Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Verón Lassa & Pallarés Navarro, 2017; López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2018), as well as a study on agenda-setting effects between posts on Instagram and press articles (Towner & Lego Muñoz, 2017). In any case, research on Instagram is still scarce compared to that focused on Facebook and Twitter –and publications on the political use of Instagram in Spain are particularly rare (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017).

In general, the results of these researches point towards a growing relevance of the figure of the candidate on Instagram, although this does not necessarily entail a clear humanization strategy. Thus, despite the interaction opportunities offered by Instagram, candidates use this network to convey their image as political professionals. At the same time, there is a certain interest in associating their *ideal candidate* image with family and personal traits, as demonstrated by an analysis focused on the United States (Muñoz & Towner, 2017). In Austria, Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) highlighted the content related to the biography of Alexander Van der Bellen as a key visual strategy to be considered as a legitimate candidate. On the other hand, Lalancette and Raynauld’s (2017) study of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau found that the politician’s images were part of a growing campaign of personalization. In Sweden, Filimonov et al. (2016) stated that the candidates had

a strong visual presence, but without showing themselves significantly in private contexts, but rather in professional settings, although apparently spontaneously. In the same vein, a study by Ekman and Widholm (2017) applied to the sixteen Swedish political Instagram profiles with the most followers also showed a lack of personal images, which stood out more within the Democratic sector.

The case of Spain: Instagram and the new politics

In the Spanish case, Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés Oliva (2017) consider Instagram in terms of permanent campaign strategy: as the 2016 Spanish elections approached, the candidates increased the number of publications, but did not differ in the form or content of messages; they also indicate that the pictures' primary objective is to humanize political celebrities. According to López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat, the image projected by the leaders on Instagram during the conflict in Catalonia responded, among others, to an "intense personalization dynamic" and a "positive emotional appeal"; however, the leaders did not take advantage of the network to humanize their image by publishing pictures from the private sphere (2018, p. 1026). Also in relation to Catalonia, Cartes Barroso (2018) studied the official accounts of the Catalan parliament in September-October 2017, finding that pro-independence groups use Instagram more than those against it. Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño (2017) showed that 26.22% of the publications of Spanish deputies on Instagram belonged to unofficial contexts, although politicians are mostly represented in a scenario where they are shown developing activities linked to their professional roles. The authors also state that the new parties, such as Podemos and Ciudadanos, make a more humanized use of Instagram than the traditional parties, although "even if there are numerous publications marked by proximity and ease, a certain constraint typical of other media survives" (2017, p. 913). In a similar vein, in their study on the leader of Ciudadanos, Albert Rivera, Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro (2017) pointed out that most of the publications referred to his work as a politician, with 20% dedicated to showing the personal aspect. Studying the 2016 general elections, Marcos García and Alonso Muñoz (2017) found that content in private or personal contexts is practically non-existent in the accounts of the main national parties and their respective leaders, although the humanization of politics is at the same time a priority. More recently, Carrasco-Polanco, Sánchez-de-la-Nieta-Hernández, and Trelles-Villanueva (2020) have analyzed Instagram posts during the 2018 Andalusian regional elections, focusing on the quantity and frequency of publication.

We must consider that these researches are contextualized at a time of upheaval in the Spanish political system. Traditionally characterized by a scheme of two predominant parties –the aforementioned PSOE and PP– that have alternated in power at the state level and in most of the autonomous communities since 1982,

the system began to break down after the 2014 European Parliament elections. Previously, in 2007, the Unión Progreso y Democracia party had emerged with the intention of occupying the political center; although far from unseating the traditional parties, it did reach more than one million votes in the 2011 general elections. In the 2014 European elections, the predominant parties lost substantial support, while emerging parties like Podemos –a leftist coalition formed just 129 days before the elections– entered the political map with impetus. The irruption of Podemos –which included some of the proposals of the Spanish *indignados* movement (known as the 15-M of 2011)– was the preamble to the momentum experienced by another emerging party, Ciudadanos, a liberal coalition originally circumscribed to Catalonia that ended up becoming another competitor for bipartisanship and that, at times, has tried to occupy the political center. Thus, after the 2015, 2016 and 2019 general elections, Ciudadanos and Podemos became part of the main national parliamentary political forces. At the same time, in Catalonia, a republican and separatist movement was gaining strength, especially as of 2017, polarizing Catalan politics into pro and anti-independence sectors. Because of the reaction against the Catalan independence movement, at the end of 2018 the nationalist and far-right coalition VOX (Ferreira, 2019) obtained representation in the Andalusian Parliament and began to influence the national agenda, obtaining 52 seats in Congress after the 2019 general election. These elections positioned VOX as the third political force in the country, as well as one of the main ones in the opposition to the current leftist coalition government formed by PSOE and Podemos, in the context of a multiparty political situation.

In the midst of this unprecedented situation, the term *new politics* became a common reference in Spanish media and political discourse; a concept not exempt from ambiguity, usually identified with a different way of understanding and exercising politics, as opposed to the so-called *old politics*, and that allows a new form of communication, a new type of leadership and greater citizenship involvement (Domínguez Benavente, 2017). Applied to parties such as Podemos and Ciudadanos, new politics seems to encompass all those actions that seek to “bring politics closer to the citizen” (Civieta, 2015, par. 4), including the use of tools and technologies that allow greater visibility of the efforts of the parties; thus, the new politics is connected with the use of social networks, to the point that the differentiation between new and old leaderships has become a variable considered in the analysis of the political use of these networks (López-García, 2016; López-Meri et al., 2017). Beyond Ciudadanos y Podemos, the use of technologies has been decisively incorporated into the process of multiparty fragmentation of the political spectrum, as evidenced by the use of social networks made by VOX, that has been the object of studies that show a communication strategy focused on new technologies, and

whose dissemination capacity is supported by short and clear messages (García Herrero, 2019). Its success, therefore, is due to the participation of “prescribing profiles, that is, accounts with a high level of followers and activity” (Cea Esteruelas, 2019, p. 51). In this context, this research analyzes the use that the main Spanish political leaders make of Instagram in a context of crisis of bipartisanship and the multiplication of communication options. As we will see, the findings indicate that new politics does not necessarily imply a new or different use of technological tools.

OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESES, AND CASE STUDY

As stated before, in this work we study the use that the main leaders make of Instagram, a social network owned by Facebook Inc., based on the publication of pictures and videos, and that allows comments and likes by users. Specifically, our specific objectives (SO) are:

SO1. Analyze the representation of the leaders of the main Spanish political parties on Instagram.

SO2. Specify the propaganda functions fulfilled by Instagram in the representation of these leaders and in relation to their political rivals.

We chose Instagram as an object of study firstly due to its extraordinary popularity, since with 500 million active users per day (Instagram, 2018) it represents an audience of undoubted interest for the political class. Second, Instagram is the network that has experienced the largest growth inside and outside of political communication. According to the *Navegantes en la Red* research (AIMC, 2019), it ranks as the second most consulted network in Spain, with 51.2%, and it is also the social network that grew the most in Spain in 2018 (Instagram, *la red social...*, 2019). Third, it is a young social network that in 2017 had 90% of users under the age of 35 (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017) and that, according to the data available at the time of the study, in Spain two thirds of its users (65%) were between the ages of 18 and 39 (The Social Media Family, 2018). Since the youth factor is linked to the parties of the new politics, it is interesting to study a platform where young people abound. A fourth factor that makes Instagram an object of interest is of a semiotic in nature, since its fundamental feature is the predominance of image over text, which deepens its ability to personalize the politician and give more space to the communication’s emotional plot. From the point of view of the propaganda image, another interesting feature of Instagram is that the leader and his team decide the type of images to be published, when traditionally the politician’s photographs were chosen by the media (Filimonov et al., 2016).

Our analysis focuses on messages published between September and December 2018; three months of activity that conclude with the regional elections that took place in Andalusia on December 2 of that year. This context is interesting since, as of 2014, Spain has been in a state of permanent offline campaign, as well as in a period of political tension characterized by the end of bipartisanship, the separatist movement in Catalonia, and the emergence of populist forces from the left and right. In this convulsion scenario –which, on the other hand, is not exclusive to Spain, since it impacts the international scene–we consider it relevant to analyze the representation of top-level leaders in such a popular network. Considering this and based on the specific objectives stipulated above, our analysis is articulated through the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. To what extent and in which context is the political leader represented on Instagram?

RQ2. Is the representation of the political rival on Instagram relevant?

RQ3. Is the leaders' communication in line with the corporate elements of their parties?

Regarding RQ1, we can derive the following hypothesis (H1) from the accumulated knowledge about politicians on Instagram:

H1. Leaders are represented on Instagram in predominantly professional contexts.

Second, RQ2 can give rise to an additional hypothesis if we consider previous literature on social networks that indicates the presence of a negative campaign and criticism of the adversary in an autonomous electoral context (López Meri, 2016):

H2. The representation of the political rival is relevant in the communication of the Spanish leaders on Instagram.

As for RQ3, the theoretical framework also provides us with a basis to derive a third hypothesis –specifically, the scarce appearance of party identity elements (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017):

H3. The communication of the Spanish leaders on Instagram is not in line with the corporate elements of their parties.

On the other hand, the new/old policy variable allows us to formulate a RQ4:

PI4. Are there differences in the use of Instagram between the traditional parties and the new politics parties?

Based on the assumption that new parties tend to focus on social networks –which allow to conduct campaigns with low budgets (Gueorguieva, 2008)– and,

specifically, from the research of Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño that indicates a most relevant use of Instagram among the new Spanish parties (2017), another hypothesis can be derived:

H4. The new politics' leaders make a more relevant quantitative use of Instagram than the leaders of traditional parties.

The study of electoral periods has the advantage that the research focuses on “times when political communication is at its most strategic, pre-planned, and intense” moment (Enli & Moe, 2013, p. 638), providing optimal material to analyze the parties' intentions and behavior. Nevertheless, the use of social networks implies a continuous communication effort on the part of the political forces. From here arises RQ5:

RQ5. Are there differences in the political use of Instagram in electoral and non-electoral periods?

The empirical evidence shows differences in the electoral and non-electoral use of social networks in Spanish politics (Herrera Damas, 2015), leading us to the last hypothesis:

H5. The political use of Instagram in Spain differs in electoral and non-electoral periods.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) of the Instagram posts published in the official profiles of the leaders of the four national Spanish political coalitions that obtained parliamentary representation in the 2016 elections: Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Pablo Casado (PP), Albert Rivera (Citizens), and Pablo Iglesias (Unidos Podemos). With this multiparty selection of leaders, we have tried to avoid traditional bipartisanship, including in the sample coalitions of the new and old politics at 50%. The ideological variety of the sample should also be highlighted: options originally located on the anti-capitalist left (Podemos), conservative (PP), social democrats (PSOE), and liberal center-right (Ciudadanos).

The sampled period covers from September 2 to December 2, 2018, i.e., three months that conclude with the Andalusian regional elections on December 2. Thus, the sample provides evidence of behavior on Instagram both in the non-electoral period (September 2-November 15) and during the electoral campaign (November 16-December 2). The Andalusian online campaign was selected as a context for four reasons: first, it was the prelude to a long electoral cycle in Spain in 2018-2019 that included general, European, regional and municipal elections;

second, national leaders such as Casado or Rivera became intensely involved in the campaign, so that the results in Andalusia ended up being interpreted with a national optic; third, it was the moment when the current Spanish multiparty system crystallized, since after the 2015 and 2016 national elections, which had forged a structure of four major national parties (precisely, the four analyzed in this work), the Andalusian elections of 2018 would be, retrospectively, the moment when the current puzzle of five major national parties was completed, with the entry of VOX into parliamentary life; fourth, and as the most important factor, these are the first elections that occurred in a context, in 2018, where Instagram had already become a more influential network than Twitter –in fact, 2018 was called the year of Instagram (2018, *el año de Instagram*, 2018)– so the Andalusian elections represent an optimal context to analyze the use of this emerging network.

In total, the number of Instagram posts analyzed amounts to 504 units of analysis: 135 from the electoral period and 369 from the non-electoral period. No additional sampling was carried out from the initial 504 units, since these make up the total universe of messages published during the months studied.

A frequency analysis was applied to these posts, which starts from the following operationalization of variables and categories: in addition to quantifying the number of posts made by each leader and the average daily frequency, we also analyzed formal elements such as content (image, video, text, or a combination of image and text); visual format of the content (photography, collage, illustration, montage, etc.), and presence of a linguistic message that accompanies the post. To this are added two variables referring to the representation of the leader: appearance or not in the post (either visually or mentioned), and image context (situation in which the leader appears: professional, media, personal context, etc.). This last variable is related to the performance scenarios (media, professional, private...) that have already been applied to the study of the political image on Instagram (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). Since in Spain the parties still have a leading role, as or more relevant than that of individual candidates, the coding sheet also includes two variables referring to continuity regarding party propaganda: presence of symbols (such as flags or logos) and presence of the party's corporate color, i.e., elements related to the idea of staging previously studied (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). To consider the representation of political rivals, we added a variable referring to the type of propaganda in which each post can be placed, based on the tripartite classification of *affirmative propaganda* (messages focused exclusively on propagating the leader, party or institution, without mentioning the political rival), *denial propaganda* (focused on the rival's negative or pejorative representation) and *reaction propaganda* (which presents the leader or own party as palliative or corrective in the face of a threatening situation posed by the rival) (Pineda Cachero, 2006).

Dimension	Variable	Categories
Formal analysis	Visual content of the post	Image only / Video / Text only / Combined image and text
	Content format	Photography / Collage / Illustration / Montage / Meme / Indeterminate / Other
	Linguistic message accompanying the post	Yes/No
Content analysis	Appearance of the leader	Yes / No / Indeterminate
	Image context	Professional context / Media context / Personal context / Public way / Other / Undetermined
Corporate image	Party symbology	Flag / Logo / Other
	Dominant corporate color	Red / Blue / Purple / Orange / Other / No predominant color
Propaganda	Type of propaganda	Affirmation propaganda / Denial propaganda / Reaction propaganda / Indeterminate
	References to political rival	PP / PSOE / Podemos / Izquierda Unida / Ciudadanos / VOX / Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya / PDeCat / Partido Nacionalista Vasco / Bildu / Others / None

Table 1. Summary of variables analyzed

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding this, the coding sheet quantifies which references are made to a rival political party (both linguistically and via image), and which rival is it. Table-summary 1 synthesizes these variables.

The intercoder reliability index was calculated in two phases: first, a reliability pre-test using the Holsti formula yielded an initial 0.80 agreement and served to refine the variables and categories used. Subsequently, a two-coder test, using Krippendorff’s alpha, yielded an index of 0.88, which can be considered acceptable in terms of reliability.

RESULTS

Regarding the formal aspects, most Instagram posts consist of images without text, i.e., publications with images within which there is no text, which should not be confused with the linguistic message that usually accompanies the posts. In relative terms, the percentage of this type of images is 88.6% of the total in the non-electoral period, and 90.4% in the period corresponding to the Andalusian elections. At this point there are no differences between the political leaders, since they all use mostly

images without text and, far less, videos. As for the format of the images, the vast majority of leaders use pictures, both during the electoral and non-electoral periods: of the 504 posts, 440 are photographs, while the montages and collages are secondary or practically non-existent. An interesting fact is that, during the electoral period, all the leaders, except Pablo Casado (leader of the PP), include in every publication a linguistic message that accompanies the visual post. This is the case of a post by Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) on September 4, where the linguistic comment clarifies that the picture of the leader is about an interview on television. Beyond the formal aspects, it is interesting to check in detail the frequency of publication by the leaders (table 2).

These data show that the leaders of the traditional parties (Sánchez, of the PSOE and, above all, Casado, of the PP) have a much higher activity than that of the leaders of the new politics, Rivera (Ciudadanos) and Iglesias (Podemos). The latter, specifically, has a practically insignificant activity, especially during the elections. It is worth noting that Casado is the most active leader on Instagram in both electoral and non-electoral periods. The publication frequencies, on the other hand, can be complemented with the average daily publication frequencies for each candidate and period (table 3).

The data in table 3 show, once again, that Casado turns out to be the one who publishes the most on Instagram daily in both periods, which contrasts sharply with the average publication frequencies of Iglesias, lower than one post per day. On the other hand, if the electoral period is compared with the one prior to the elections, it should be noted that all the candidates accelerated their daily frequency of publication, especially the two right-wing candidates (Casado and Rivera).

Table 4 shows interesting results about the propaganda function of Instagram, the with an almost absolute predominance of affirmation propaganda in the case of the PSOE leader and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, both in non-electoral and electoral periods, in the latter case with frequencies close to 100%. An example of Sánchez's abundant use of self-affirmation can be seen in a post (image 1) that frames the leader in a personal-family context.

Regarding affirmation propaganda, it should also be noted that it is the type of communication most used by all the candidates (see the example in image 2, which shows a propaganda focused on Iglesias and free from rivals), and invariably in both contexts.

Also noteworthy is the low weight of denial propaganda, which is not used even once during the Andalusian online campaign, and which achieves poor results in the non-electoral period –the most notorious case is that of the conservative Casado, with 13.4%. In summary, quantitatively, the appeal to the political rival is a very secondary fact on Instagram (table 5).

	Non-electoral period		Electoral period		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	137	37.1	63	46.7	200	39.7
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	133	36.1	33	24.4	166	32.9
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	72	19.5	31	23	103	20.4
Pablo Iglesias (Podemos)*	27	7.3	8	5.9	35	7
Total	369	100	135	100	504	100

* Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 2. Instagram posts (frequencies and percentages)

Source: Own elaboration.

	Non-electoral period	Electoral period	Media total
Pablo Casado (PP)	1.83	3.71	2.77
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	1.77	1.94	1.85
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	0.96	1.82	1.39
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	0.36	0.47	0.41
Media total de candidatos	1.23	1.98	1.6

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 3. Average daily publication frequency

Source: Own elaboration.

Leader	Non-electoral period					Electoral period			
	Affirmation propaganda	Denial propaganda	Reaction propaganda	Indeterminate	TOTAL	Affirmation propaganda	Denial propaganda	Indeterminate	TOTAL
Pablo Casado (PP)	54	13.1	32.1	0.7	100	82.5	15.9	1.6	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	93.2	-	1.5	5.3	100	97	-	3	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	26.4	2.8	18.1	52.8	100	64.5	6.5	29	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	55.6	3.7	11.1	29.6	100	62.5	25	12.5	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 4. Type of political propaganda (percentages)

Source: Own elaboration.

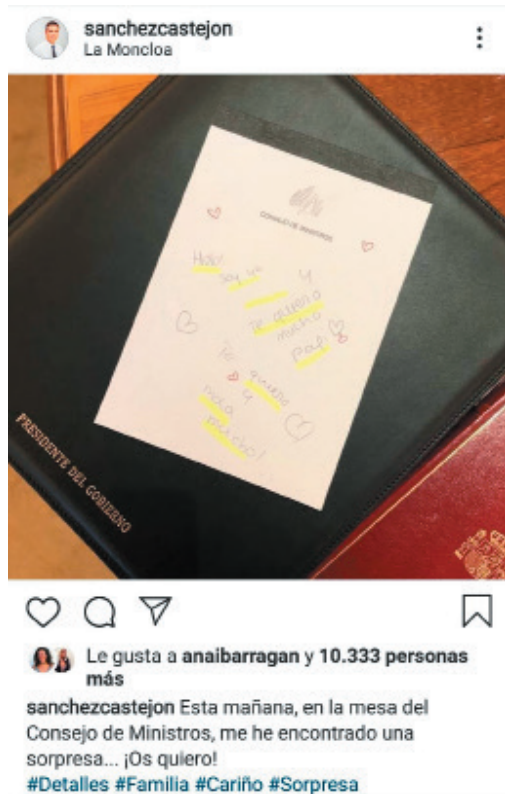


Image 1. Post by Pedro Sánchez.

Source: Sánchez Castejón (2018).



Image 2. Post de Pablo Iglesias

Source: Iglesias Turrión (2018).

	PP		PSOE		Podemos		Ciudadanos		ERC#		Indeterminate		None		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	-	-	43	31.4	-	-	2	1.5	2	1.5	19	13.9	71	51.8	137	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	3	2.3	-	-	2	1.5	-	-	-	-	1	0.8	127	95.5	133	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	1	1.4	5	6.9	-	-	-	-	1	1.4	6	8.3	59	81.9	72	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	1	3.7	8	29.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	66.7	27	100
Total	5	1.4	56	15.2	2	0.54	2	0.5	3	0.8	26	7.1	275	74.5	369	100

#Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya.

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 5. Appearance of the political rival in the non-electoral period

Source: Own elaboration.

These results are interesting for two reasons. In the first place, they are in line with the logic of affirmation propaganda: the mention of the rival is either secondary –as in the cases of Podemos, Ciudadanos and, above all, the PSOE, where it does not reach 5%– or non-predominant, as in the case of the PP where, although the mentions of different rivals appear in a considerable percentage of its publications, it is still behind the posts where Casado does not mention any political rival. On the other hand, in terms of the data that reflect mentions of rivals, there is a trend where the PSOE is configured as the antagonist most mentioned by the rest of the leaders, and especially by the leader of the PP, who mentions the socialists on many occasions. An example can be seen in a post by Casado on October 17, 2018 that states: “It is not the first time that the PSOE has presented budgets manipulating expenses and income, raising taxes and the deficit: ultimately, ruining Spain” (Casado Blanco, 2018). Another noteworthy fact is the mentions made by the right-wing leaders Casado and Rivera of the Catalan nationalist party ERC, their political rival; in addition, the leaders of Podemos and Ciudadanos –of the new politics– do not mention each other as rivals despite their pronounced ideological differences.

Some trends observed in table 5 are radicalized in the Andalusian elections (table 6). On the one hand, we find a clear strategy of invisibilization of the competitors, once again extreme in the case of Sánchez (who does not mention any rival in the entire campaign), but also very pronounced in the cases of Rivera (93.6%), Iglesias (75%) and even Casado (84.13%). On the other hand, the only rival party that is clearly cited as such is the PSOE (especially by Casado, but also by Rivera).

Beyond the tendency to make rivals invisible, the prevalence of affirmation propaganda can also be related to the leader’s appearance frequency, as shown in table 7.

In both electoral and non-electoral periods, all leaders tend to appear continuously –either visually or mentioned– in their publications. Pablo Iglesias stands out especially in this regard, as he is shown or mentioned in 100% of his posts (see image 2 as an example). Casado stands out at the other extreme, since he does not appear in almost 20% of his electoral publications. On the other hand, overall, it is striking that the percentage of appearance of leaders is higher in the non-electoral period (94.6%) than in the electoral one (84.4%).

As for the leader’s representation, the context in which it is shown is interesting. Starting from the September-November period (table 8), the representation of the leaders is mainly professional, especially Sánchez (89.5%) and Casado (72.3%). The leader who appears the least in a professional context in relative terms is Iglesias (33.3%); however, he is shown on a public space (29.6%) proportionally more times than the other candidates and in a media context (25.9%).

	PSOE		Indeterminate		None		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	9	14.3	1	1.6	53	84.1	63	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	-	-	-	-	33	100	33	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	2	6.5	-	-	29	93.6	31	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	-	-	2	25	6	75	8	100
Total	11	8,2	3	2,2	121	89,6	135	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 6. Appearance of the political rival in the electoral period

Source: Own elaboration.

Leader	Non-electoral period						Electoral period					
	Appears in the post		Does not appear		Total		Appears in the post		Does not appear		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	134	97.8	3	2.2	137	100	51	80.9	12	19.1	63	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	128	96.2	5	3.8	133	100	32	97	1	3	33	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	60	83.3	12	16.7	72	100	23	74.2	8	25.8	31	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	27	100	-	-	27	100	8	100	-	-	8	100
Total	349	94.6	20	5.4	369	100	114	84.4	21	15.6	135	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 7. Appearance of the leader

Source: Own elaboration.

‘The appearance of the leader in a personal context, on the other hand, is a very secondary category in almost all cases, except for the liberal Rivera (12.5%).

The preeminence of the professional context persists in the electoral period (table 9). Once again, Sánchez is the most represented in a work context (91%), far behind the rest of the leaders, who are around 50% in this category.

	Professional context		Media context		Personal context		Public space		Other		Indeterminate		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	99	72.3	14	10.2	3	2.2	12	8.8	7	5.1	2	1.5	137	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	119	89.5	7	5.3	1	0.8	3	2.3	3	2.3	-	-	133	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	43	59.7	4	5.6	9	12.5	8	11.1	3	4.2	5	6.9	72	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	9	33.3	7	25.9	2	7.4	8	29.6	-	-	1	3.7	27	100
Total	270	73.2	32	8.7	15	4.1	31	8.4	13	3.5	8	2.1	369	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 8. Context of representation of the leader in non-electoral period

Source: Own elaboration.

Given the importance of the professional context, it is worth mentioning, from a more qualitative perspective, the ways in which this variable can be broken down based on the information provided by the pictures: thus, the representation of official activities of the leader includes (a) the leader’s work in his office, (b) campaign rally, (c) party act, (d) intervention of the leader in Congress, (e) official visits, (f) official acts, and (g) pictures with people attending the leader’s activities. The public space context is the second most frequent category, especially in the cases of Iglesias (37.5%) and Casado (14.2%). The personal (except for Rivera) and media contexts are very secondary.

The data on leader representation make more sense when they are related to the presence of partisan propaganda elements (table 10). These data indicate that the reference to the party’s symbolism is an irrelevant factor. Except for Casado, who uses PP logos in 19% in the non-electoral period, the absence of flags or logos is a constant, with relative values around 90%, or even higher. In fact, if we consider the totals, the corporate image of the parties seems more overlooked even in electoral periods than in non-electoral months.

	Professional context		Media context		Personal context		Public space		Indeterminate		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	34	54	2	3.2	-	-	9	14.2	15	23.8	63	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	30	91	2	3.2	-	-	-	-	1	3	33	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	17	54.8	-	-	4	12.9	3	9.7	5	16.1	31	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	4	50	-	-	1	12.5	3	37.5	-	-	8	100
Total	85	62.9	4	2.9	5	3.7	15	11.1	21	15.5	135	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 9. Context of representation of the leader in electoral period

Source: Own elaboration.

Leader	Non-electoral period				Electoral period				Total									
	Flag		Logo		None		Other				None							
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%						
Pablo Casado (PP)	-	-	26	19	111	81	137	100	-	-	4	6.3	1	1.6	58	92.1	63	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	1	0.7	7	5.3	125	94	133	100	1	3	2	6	-	-	30	91	33	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	-	-	8	11.1	64	88.9	72	100	-	-	2	6.4	-	-	29	93.6	31	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	-	-	1	3.7	26	96.3	27	100	1	12.5	-	-	-	-	7	87.5	8	100
Total	1	0.3	42	11.4	326	88.3	369	100	2	1.5	8	6	1	0.7	124	92	135	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 10. Presence of political party symbols (frequencies and percentages)

Source: Own elaboration.

Leader	Non-electoral period				Electoral period											
	Corporate color		Other color		No predominant color		Total		Corporate color		Other color		No predominant color		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pablo Casado (PP)	53	38.7	22	16.1	62	45.2	137	100	3	4.8	28	44.4	32	50.8	63	100
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	10	7.5	17	12.8	106	79.7	133	100	-	-	6	18.2	27	81.8	33	100
Albert Rivera* (Ciudadanos)	6	8.3	5	7	61	84.7	72	100	1	3.2	6	19.4	24	77.4	31	100
Pablo Iglesias* (Podemos)	-	-	-	-	27	100	27	100	-	-	-	-	8	100	8	100
Total	69	18.7	44	11.9	256	69.4	369	100	4	3	40	29.6	91	67.4	135	100

*Leaders of the so-called new politics.

Table 11. Predominant color

Source: Own elaboration.

Along with symbols, the corporate color (table 11) of each party is a relevant element of its visual identity. In this work, we have coded to what extent the posts were chromatically dominated by the color of each coalition: red (in the case of the PSOE), blue (PP), orange (Ciudadanos) or purple (Iglesias).

Considering this data, it cannot be said that the corporate color is especially taken care of in a fundamentally visual medium, such as Instagram. In non-electoral months, the posts characterized by the colors of the respective parties do not even reach 20% in relative terms, while the proportion of publications where a certain color does not predominate is very close to 70% (in the case of Iglesias, 100%). The only leader who seems to pay some attention to the color of his party is Casado, who uses PP’s blue 38.7% of the time in the non-electoral period. In any case, the indifference towards colors is radicalized in electoral times, where messages that predominantly use corporate colors are reduced to 3%, the general trend being the absence of predominant colors. The lack of strategic use of color reaches its highest point with Iglesias (100%), and finds its exception in Casado, who uses corporate colors, although it is not the case of blue, which in this case does not even reach 5%.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In line with the specific objectives proposed, and to specify the way in which political leaders are represented on Instagram, we will focus the discussion on three aspects: the leaders' degree of activity on Instagram according to the ideological variable and the old/new politics distinction; the degree of personalization of the leader and the levels of attack on the rival, and the continuity or not of the leaders' communication regarding party propaganda.

Although there are authors who consider that the propaganda of a candidate on Instagram refers only to those images related to their political agenda (Verón Lassa & Pallarés Navarro, 2017), all the images published by the leaders in this and other networks serve by definition for the purposes of propaganda: either of political or personal content, they are guided by the attempt to achieve, maintain or reinforce a position of power, trying to project a certain image. Thus, the pictures used in the leaders' profiles can be understood a priori as photographic propaganda (Barragán-Romero, 2017).

Based on the previous premise, the first empirical finding of our study has to do with the considerable activity shown by the leaders of the traditional parties, PP and PSOE, which is in line with previous data indicating greater activity on Instagram by them in the 2016 elections (Marcos García & Alonso Muñoz, 2017). If we examine the regional electoral contexts, the results of this work would also be in line with data that indicate, for example, that the parties that published the most tweets in the 2015 elections to the Community of Madrid were the PSOE and the PP (Marín Dueñas and Díaz Guerra, 2016), or that among the parties that concentrated most of the publications on Twitter during the 2015 Catalan elections are the Partido Socialista de Cataluña or the PP (López Meri, 2016). This could be explained by the relationship of traditional parties with electoral machines endowed with greater resources than those of other parties. In this regard, our data contradicts the idea that emerging parties use social networks to a greater extent, so that H4 (*the new politics' leaders make a more relevant quantitative use of Instagram than the leaders of traditional parties*) is not verified; in fact, in some cases, there is practically a marginal use, as shown by the few messages from the Podemos leader in the context of the Andalusian campaign. Nevertheless, it is necessary to be cautious when extrapolating Pablo Iglesias' results to the national context, since part of the data comes from elections where he was not a candidate, so the conclusions should not be generalized to the communicative behavior of Podemos.

Considering the ideological variable as a discriminating element in the use of networks, our analysis can be added to the dissimilar results found in previous research on Twitter, where some authors find a similar activity between the PSOE

and the PP (Criado et al., 2013), while others find a greater activity on the part of the first (Abejón et al., 2012), or a lower activity on the part of the latter (Cebrián Guinovart et al., 2013). Our data indicate that although there is not too much difference in terms of frequency of publication between the PP and the PSOE in non-electoral times, the activity on Instagram does depend on ideology, and with a clear predominance of the right-wing: the conservative Casado always publishes more than the social-democrat Sánchez, and the liberal Rivera always makes more posts than the leftist Iglesias. This is in line with the data from Carrasco-Polanco et al. (2020) on the Andalusian elections on Instagram, that show that the PP was one of the parties that published the most, and at the same time contradicts the trend on Twitter, where it seems that activity is higher among left-wing political forces (Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2011; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2018).

Our first research question asked to what extent and context the political leader is represented. In this regard, the data is in line with the research by Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño on the use of Instagram by Spanish deputies (2017). It is also in the same vein with the data regarding the use of Instagram by Swedish parties, also with a personalization strategy (Filimonov et al., 2016). However, if we compare our data on regional elections with research conducted in the same context, we find that a network such as Twitter is used to a large extent as an information board or a campaign speaker, as shown by studies on the 2015 regional elections in Madrid and Catalonia (López Meri, 2016; Marín Dueñas & Díaz Guerra 2016), or that, as stated by a research on the elections in the Valencian Community of that same year, issues of a personal nature are very secondary compared to the campaign as a theme itself (López García, Cano Orón, & Argilés Martínez, 2016). This may indicate that, in the regional electoral arena, Instagram is more prone to personalization than Twitter.

Our data, in any case, offer ambivalent results regarding how politics is personalized in social networks. In terms of Van Aelst et al. (2012), the propaganda of Spanish leaders on Instagram would show, on the one hand, a marked individualization –reflected in the secondary nature of the party symbology– and, on the other, a notorious absence of privatization, reflected in the scarce quantitative weight personal and private contexts have. Thus, it could be said that personalization on Instagram occurs by individualizing the leader, but without paying much attention to his private life. The relevance of the representation of leaders in professional contexts in this research –which confirms our first hypothesis– is also in line with the data that indicate that it is “mostly a stage from which they are shown developing the activities linked to their roles as politicians” (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017, p. 908), which is also in the same vein as similar research conducted in other countries (Filimonov et al., 2016; Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017; Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

The second research question (*Is the representation of the political rival on Instagram relevant?*) must be answered negatively; the same happens with the hypothesis linked to it (H2), which is not verified: Instagram is essentially configured as a field of affirmation propaganda, with the denial campaign strategy reduced to secondary dimensions or, in the case of the electoral period studied, practically irrelevant. This contrasts with the electoral use of other social networks in regional elections, such as Twitter, which seems more oriented to the denial campaign, as indicated by the study on the 2015 Catalan elections that shows the PP and Ciudadanos criticizing the adversary, especially based on the independence issue (López Meri, 2016). In any case, we should consider, once more, that the sampling conditions and the nature of the campaign may have influenced the irrelevance of denial propaganda, which in a national context could yield different results.

The answer to the third research question (*Is the leaders' communication in line with the corporate elements of their parties?*) is also negative: the use of elements such as symbols or color is practically irrelevant –except for Pablo Casado. In this regard, the hypothesis (H3) posited is verified, and our data is in line with previous findings on the scarce appearance of identity elements of the Spanish parties (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017).

Concerning the fifth research question (regarding the differences in the use of Instagram in electoral and non-electoral periods), it is also negatively answered, as there are no relevant differences, so that HI5 would not be verified. Overall, the non-electoral period is characterized by affirmative propaganda, the secondary presence of political rivalry, the predominance of the professional context to the detriment of the private-family context, and very little corporatism in terms of colors and symbols. The electoral period does not differ, with even a greater predominance of affirmation propaganda than in non-electoral months, and a more irrelevant use of corporate elements. Thus, it could be stated, in terms of Van Aelst et al. (2012), that the trend towards personalization is clear in both periods, but privatization occupies a very small part in the leader's representation.

Finally, it must be stated that this research has a series of limitations. One of them is the regional electoral context in which part of the data is framed; another derives from the fact that the results refer to the propaganda behavior of Spanish leaders and may not be representative of the behavior of leaders from other countries. National differences are in line with Enli and Moe when they state that “the impact of social media on election campaigns is fairly diverse across different regions and countries, depending on media environments, cultural practices, and political systems” (2013, p. 641). From these limitations, additional lines of research emerge: on the one hand, analyzing the propaganda on Instagram of Spanish leaders in different electoral contexts (local, national, etc.) and, on the other, studying the use of this network transnationally.

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