
Miscellaneous

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European elections on TikTok: the Spanish case

Abstract

European elections offer a unique opportunity for researchers to analyze political campaigns. Often considered second-order elections, they tend to receive fewer resources and less attention from the media and voters than national elections. However, perhaps because of this, parties use these campaigns to test innovative tactics, especially on social media. Among other platforms, TikTok, originally intended for entertainment-only content, is increasingly a critical tool for political communication. Its strategic implementation in campaigns reached new heights in 2024. On this basis, our work investigates how Spanish candidates used TikTok during the electoral campaign for the most recent European Parliament (EP) elections, exploring its effectiveness, challenges, and potential as a tool for engaging and mobilizing voters. Through a content analysis of all videos posted by Spanish candidates during the electoral campaign, we show that, contrary to what is found in other countries, TikTok usage by Spanish politicians is still limited and inconsistent. Not all candidates have integrated the platform into their communication strategies, and most of those who have still do not show a sufficient level of adaptation to TikTok's affordances and vernacular. Furthermore, a clear difference emerges: populist parties show better results in terms of engagement due to their better adaptation to the platform's cultural environment. Engagement data also show that emotional and controversial content attracts more views, suggesting an increase in politainment.

Keywords

Political communication, campaigning, elections, Europe, European Parliament, politainment, Spain, social media, TikTok.

1. Introduction

Due to the extraordinary number of elections held worldwide, 2024 has been termed the "super-election year" (Mallapaty et al., 2024). Over 100 countries, representing nearly half the world's population, conducted national elections, including major democracies such as Brazil, India, Mexico, and the United States. In Europe, key elections took place in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, alongside the European Parliament elections in June. Additionally, 2024 has seen the consolidation of TikTok's role as a central tool in political campaigning (Gómez-García et al., 2023): while political actors worldwide began joining the platform during its surge in popularity amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Olivares-García

& Méndez-Majuelos, 2020; Chen et al., 2021), its strategic implementation in campaigns reached new heights this year (Luo et al., 2024).

European elections offer a unique opportunity for researchers to analyze political campaigns (Vieten, 2024). Often considered second-order elections (Bartels, 2023), they tend to receive fewer resources and less attention from the media and voters than national elections. However, perhaps because of this, parties use these contests to test innovative tactics (Lilleker, 2012), transforming them into a fertile ground for robust social media campaigns (Navarro-Sierra & Quevedo-Redondo, 2020).

Accordingly, this work investigates how Spanish political actors used TikTok during the electoral campaign for the most recent European Parliament (EP) elections, exploring its effectiveness, challenges, and potential as a tool for engaging and mobilizing voters.

2. Literature review

2.1. *TikTok and Politics*

TikTok, initially regarded as a platform for lighthearted entertainment (Vijay & Gekker, 2021), has evolved into a vibrant digital arena, redefining how young people engage with politics (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). This transformation is driven by a combination of multifaceted and interconnected factors (Cho, 2022). Among these, the platform's unique affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) are widely recognized for generating a distinct form of communication (Kaye et al., 2021) that encourages both creative content production (Brown et al., 2022) and political expression (Karimi & Fox, 2023; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

TikTok offers an extensive suite of user-friendly tools—such as filters, music, and intuitive editing features—that allow individuals to easily create and share content (Kaye et al., 2021). These tools enable creators to articulate their political perspectives through what Medina Serrano et al. (2020) define as “an audiovisual act” (p. 264). In the same vein, TikTok's short-form video format encourages bite-sized, visually compelling content, ideal for breaking down complex political issues into digestible narratives (Sadler, 2022; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Another of TikTok's most distinguishing affordances is its hyper-personalized algorithmic recommendation system, exemplified by the “For You” page (Cotter et al., 2022). Unlike traditional social media platforms, TikTok de-emphasizes follower counts and established fame metrics, prioritizing engagement and relatability, and giving every user an equal opportunity to go viral (Cho, 2022). This inherent democratizing potential enables creators to shape public opinion and inspire collective action in uniquely personal and inventive ways (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

Thus, TikTok has reshaped political expression, evolving into a personalized public sphere (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Globally, TikTok has emerged as a powerful platform for young people to advocate for causes such as climate action (Hautea et al., 2021), LGBTQ+ rights (Simpson & Semaan, 2021), and anti-racism (Eriksson Krutrök & Åkerlund, 2022; Jacques et al., 2022; Abidin & Zeng, 2020), among others.

2.2. *TikTok usage by political actors*

TikTok has attracted political actors worldwide, eager to join the app “to (re)connect with young people” (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). With over a billion active users (IAB, 2023), TikTok offers unparalleled reach, particularly among Generation Z and Millennials, who often feel disconnected from traditional political messaging (Collin, 2015). By leveraging viral trends, memes, and collaborations with influencers, politicians can enhance both their

visibility and grassroots support. Such strategies encourage users to interact with and share campaign-related content, creating a ripple effect that amplifies the reach and resonance of their political messages. Studies indicate that TikTok can help elevate new or marginal political actors to prominence during election campaigns (Muñoz, 2021), as it enhances personalization by humanizing political actors (Ariza et al., 2022). By highlighting behind-the-scenes moments (Wilches-Tinjacá et al., 2024) or sharing personal stories (Barreto & Rivera Prado, 2022), politicians can convey a sense of relatability and authenticity (Becker, 2021).

Against this backdrop, many scholars argue that TikTok fosters politainment (Battista, 2023; Berdón-Prieto et al., 2023), a portmanteau of the words “politics” and “entertainment,” which refers to the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication. Politainment incorporates entertainment-driven formats, techniques, and strategies to engage audiences, making political content more accessible and appealing (Berrocal et al., 2014). Other literature points out that TikTok can also be a source of political polarization (Cuevas-Calderón et al., 2022) and hate speech (Weimann & Masri, 2021), possibly turning the platform into a breeding ground for populist right-wing parties’ communication (Castro Martínez & Días Morilla, 2021).

TikTok also facilitates direct interaction with voters. Politicians can answer questions, discuss pressing issues, or address criticism in real time, creating a sense of connection and transparency (Grantham, 2024). This form of dynamic engagement is especially effective in mobilizing younger voters, who value authenticity and interactive communication over traditional, polished rhetoric (García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2022; Becker, 2021).

Nonetheless, the growing body of research on the political use of TikTok suggests that most political actors, instead of fully utilizing the platform’s potential to establish a new or alternative form of direct communication with audiences (Grantham, 2024), either treat it as a traditional media tool, employing it primarily for unilateral promotion, or struggle to effectively adapt to the platform’s vernaculars (Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022).

While TikTok holds immense potential to engage younger voters, its informal, fast-paced, and highly visual nature starkly contrasts with the traditional approaches to political communication that many politicians rely on (Bösch, 2023). In the same vein, success on the platform often requires an understanding of trends, memes, and the distinct language of its user base (Moir, 2023); actors who are unfamiliar with these dynamics risk coming across as “cringe,” appearing disconnected or out of touch (Muñoz, 2021).

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, TikTok’s algorithm prioritizes authenticity over polished content (Cotter et al., 2022), a characteristic that conflicts with the meticulously curated images many political campaigns seek to project (Becker, 2021; Moir, 2023).

Finally, ethical concerns have arisen regarding TikTok’s parent company, ByteDance, particularly over data privacy and potential geopolitical risks (Jia & Liang, 2021). These issues have led to increased scrutiny and regulatory actions in various countries (Gray, 2021). Such developments have made some politicians wary of fully embracing the platform, considering the potential risks associated with its use.

2.3. Political uses of TikTok in Spain

While research on TikTok's use in political campaigns is still generally scarce (Alonso-López et al., 2023), studies focusing on the case of Spain are relatively abundant (Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2024). The first study analyzing the use of TikTok by political parties dates back to 2021 (Cervi, 2023). This early work, which examined the political use of TikTok in its embryonic stage and not during an election period, found that political actors did not fully take advantage of the platform's potential. More recent studies have confirmed these findings. For instance, Morejón-Llamas, (2023) concluded that political parties still fail to strategically harness TikTok's affordances; similarly, Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas et al. (2023) referred to an "embryonary stage" of its political use (p. 87). Zamora-Medina et al. (2023) also highlighted that parties continue to broadcast their messages largely through traditional communication practices, adding that politicians seldom use TikTok to deliver personalized content.

In addition, the literature has emphasized a clear difference between "old" and "new" parties. Traditionally, "old" parties in Spain, such as (PSOE) and PP, have roots dating back to the country's democratic transition in the late 1970s. These parties have typically represented established political ideologies—PSOE leaning center-left and PP center-right—and have maintained strong organizational structures and solid electoral bases. In contrast, "new" parties emerged more prominently in the 21st century, challenging the dominance of PSOE and PP. Parties like Podemos and Ciudadanos, and later SUMAR, initially gained traction by positioning themselves outside the traditional left-right spectrum, focusing on anti-establishment rhetoric, grassroots mobilization, and issues of political corruption and social inequality. VOX, another significant newcomer, has taken a different approach, advocating for conservative values and a strong stance on national unity and immigration. Thus, Podemos and VOX appear to better adapt to TikTok's affordances and global vernacular (Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas et al., 2023), both in quantitative (Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022) and qualitative terms (Castro & Días, 2021), while traditional parties continue to rely on outdated strategies, using TikTok mainly as a unidirectional promotional showcase. In the case of VOX, although most scholars agree on the party's stronger capacity to adapt to the platform, their interpretations diverge.

On one hand, Castro Martínez and Díaz Morilla (2021) concluded that the party's appeal to fear, the stigmatization of immigrants, and fierce attacks against leftist parties are key to increasing engagement, aligning with López-Fernández (2022), who argued that confrontations and accusations between leaders represent the most demanded content among followers. On the other hand, González-Aguilar et al. (2023) found that not only is hate speech uncommon in VOX's posts, but it actually plays against engagement, suggesting that TikTok may downplay the most controversial elements of the populist right. Similarly, Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2023) noted that positive and optimistic appeals play a significant role in VOX's TikTok content, demonstrating the party's attempt to adapt its communication to the platform's broader cultural environment.

Despite growing recognition that election campaigns increasingly tend toward personalization—and that the profiles of the contenders become more relevant than those of the parties they represent (Enli, 2017a)—most studies still focus on political parties' accounts rather than candidates' accounts.

Accordingly, this study investigates the TikTok accounts of the main Spanish candidates in the European Parliament (EP) elections, aiming to address the following research questions:

RQ1. How have Spanish candidates for the EP election used TikTok? TikTok has been incorporated into political communication strategies since its early adoption in Spain. However, as shown, existing research suggests that its implementation has been limited and inconsistent (Pérez Rastrilla et al, 2023). Despite this, and recognizing the adoption of TikTok by world leaders—see, among others, Kamala Harris’ groundbreaking use of the platform (Luo et al, 2024), which served as a cornerstone of her outreach strategy in her presidential campaign—these cases have demonstrated the platform’s significant potential for engaging younger audiences (García Rivero et al., 2022). We therefore hypothesize (H1) that all Spanish politicians have integrated TikTok into their communication strategy and successfully capitalize on the platform’s affordances and vernaculars.

RQ2. Is the difference between “old” and “new” parties still relevant? Prior studies focusing on the Spanish case (Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas et al., 2023; Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022; Castro & Días, 2021), have disclosed the existence of a clear gap between “new” parties, such as VOX and Podemos, and traditional parties in term of adoption, adaptation, and engagement. Accordingly, we envision (H2) that this difference is still present and relevant.

RQ3. Which topics are the most relevant? The 2024 EP elections were particularly significant for voters and were set to shape the EU’s future on key issues. Climate policies, economic recovery, inflation, migration, border reforms, and security—amplified by both the Ukraine and the Gaza war—dominated the agenda. In addition, rising far-right populism and Euroscepticism add to the stakes, making these elections pivotal for the EU’s unity and global role (Vieten, 2024). Nonetheless, most literature (Braun & Schmitt, 2020) points out that being perceived as second-order elections (Bartels, 2023), EP elections tend to function as a sort of “midterm” or referendum on the performance of ruling national governments, in which political campaigns often focus on resonant national issues to connect with voters (Navarro-Sierra & Quevedo-Redondo, 2020), relegating European integration, regulatory frameworks, or common EU policies to secondary importance. Therefore (H3) we assume that internal Spanish political issues will be quantitatively more relevant than European issues.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on the main Spanish candidates in the 2024 European Parliament election. Specifically, to select the sample from the total of 34 candidacies, we chose representatives belonging to parties that hold a seat in the Spanish Congress of Deputies: Dolors Montserrat (PP), Teresa Ribera (PSOE), Jorge Buxadé (VOX), Diana Riba (Ahora Repúblicas), Estrella Galán (Sumar), Irene Montero (Podemos), Toni Comín (Junts i Lliures per Europa), and Oihane Agirregoitia (CEUS, Coalición por una Europa Solidaria). In addition, Alvisé Pérez, leader of the electoral group “Se Acabó La Fiesta” (SALF), which translates to “The Party is Over,” has been purposely included because his prominence on social media makes him a paradigmatic case of a political influencer (Riedl et al., 2023; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

All the content published by the selected actors during the electoral campaign—which in Spain ran from May 24 to June 7—has been analyzed. The unit of analysis consists of

TikToks, defined as the video content, accompanying music, and any textual elements, excluding comments. Because of the relatively small sample ($N = 189$) and the opacity of TikTok's API (Pearson et al., 2024), data were collected manually by the authors and analyzed using a spreadsheet.

The research methodology combines quantitative and qualitative multimodal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019). The analytical variables were developed by adopting and adapting the methodology proposed by Cervi et al. (2023) and are presented in Table 1. The first set of variables examines how well the accounts adapt to TikTok's features, evaluating whether politicians fully understand and leverage the platform's technical capabilities in their content creation. **V1** investigates whether politicians produce exclusive content for TikTok or cross-post content from other platforms. **V2** and **V4** observe if and how communication strategies adapt to TikTok's specific genres, styles, and formats. From a stylistic perspective (**V3.1**), video shots are taken into consideration due to their key role in building narrative coherence (Rao et al., 2020). Similarly, the main character of each post (**V3.3**) and the type of recording (**V3.2**) are analyzed given their importance in constructing storytelling (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Lastly, based on the findings of previous studies (Wilches-Tinjacá et al., 2024; Barreto & Rivera Prado, 2022), we consider the type of background to identify where most of the videos take place (**V3.4**).

Regarding content (**V5**), three categories are identified: *Political*, *Personal*, and *Entertainment*. The *Political* category includes all explicitly political videos and is further divided based on how politics is framed. The *issue frame* focuses on political issues and specific proposals, while the *game frame* emphasizes the political process, portraying politics as competition or conflict. *Personal* content portrays the private side of politicians, showcasing aspects of their personal lives—such as family, hobbies, or individual traits—while *Entertainment*, which represents the predominant genre on the platform (Sadler, 2022; Abidin & Zeng, 2020), includes TikToks unrelated to politics and created solely for entertainment purposes, such as dances, pranks, or jokes.

We also analyze the main topics discussed in the videos (**V6**). In this case, we distinguish among content explicitly asking for votes; content dedicated to *Europe*—understood as material that explicitly refers to or mentions European directives, policies, or institutions—and *Spain*, referring to domestic issues. Additionally, due to the salience and timeliness of certain themes, we include two more categories: *immigration* and *Wars* (Israel–Palestine and Ukraine–Russia). Finally, we classify all other topics, including generic statements about politics—such as rights, principles, or values—and unrelated material under the *Other* category.

Lastly, to uncover how political actors engage with their audiences (**V7**), we applied the interaction scale developed by Lilleker and Vedel (2013). This framework distinguishes three distinct levels of interaction, each reflecting a different approach to audience engagement. At the most basic level is *information/promotion*, where political actors use social networks much like traditional media, merely broadcasting information without attempting to involve their audience in any meaningful way. The next level, *deliberation/discussion*, occurs when politicians actively seek to create dialogue by inviting feedback or encouraging their audience to share opinions, fostering two-way exchange. The highest level, *participation/mobilization*, represents a fully interactive approach, in which candidates invite their audiences to take action—whether online, by sharing or generating content, or offline, through participation in events, offering support, or engaging in other forms of involvement.

Table 1. Analytical framework. Tiktok's affordances.

TIKTOK AFFORDANCES		
V1. Source	V1.1. Original	
	V1.2. Party	
	V1.3. Media	
	V1.4. Users	
V2. Genre	V2.1. Video	
	V2.2. Duet	
	V2.3. Stitch	
	V2.4. Challenge	
	V2.5. Others	
V3. Style	V3.1. Video Shot	V3.1.1. Close Up
		V3.1.2. Medium Close Up
		V3.1.3. Full Shot
		V3.1.4. American
		V3.1.5. Two Shot
		V3.1.6. POV
		V3.1.7. Over Shoulder Close Up
		V3.1.8. Wide
		V3.1.9. Multiple
	V3.2. Type of recording	V3.2.1. Selfie
		V3.2.2. Homemade
		V3.2.3. Professional
	V3.3. Main actors	V3.3.1. Candidate
		V3.3.2. Politicians
		V3.3.3. Celebrities
		V3.3.4. Anonymous citizens
		V3.3.5. Journalists
		V3.3.6. Others
	V3.4. Type of background	V3.4.1. TV Debate
		V3.4.2. Campaign spot
		V3.4.3. Summary video
		V3.4.4. Meeting
		V3.4.4. Green Screen
		V3.4.5 Other
V4. Format	V4.1. Only video	
	V4.2. Video with effects	
	V4.3. Video with music	
	V4.4. Video and text	
	V4.5. Video with text and music	
	V4.6. Video with effects and music	
	V4.7. Video with effects and text	
	V4.8. Video with effects, text and music	
CONTENT		
V5. Content	V5.1. Political	V5.1.1 Issue Frame
		V5.1.2. Game Frame
	V5.2. Personal	
V6. Topics	V5.3. Entertainment	
	V6.1. Europe	
	V6.2. Spain	
	V6.3. Asking for the vote	
	V6.4. Immigration	
	V6.5. War	
	V6.6. Others	
INTERACTION		
V7. Interaction	V7.1. Interaction and promotion	
	V7.2. Deliberation and discussion	
	V7.3. Participation and mobilization	

Source: own elaboration.

The codification method, inspired by Vergeer and Cunha proposal (2009), is based on a nominal measurement scale of binary nature, which is particularly useful for analyzing non-numerical variables. Under this approach, a value of 1 is assigned when an element is observed, and 0 when it is not. Although, as previously noted, the variables used are based on prior studies, an intercoder reliability test was applied to a 7% subset of the data to address and refine any analytical inconsistencies. The final intercoder reliability test met the $\kappa > 0.80$ standard for all variables (Cohen, 1960). In addition, we have looked at engagement data to disclose which type of content is more successful on the platform.

4. Results

All the nominees, except for Teresa Ribera (PSOE) and Oihane Agirregoitia (CEUS) used TikTok during the EP campaign. Teresa Ribera still does not have a profile on TikTok, even after being appointed Vice-President of the European Commission, while Oihane Agirregoitia started posting videos on the platform in September 2024. As for the analyzed candidates, Irene Montero was the first to join the platform, on 22 November 2021, while Estrella Galán was the latest in opening a TikTok account, on 8 May 2024, a few days before the start of the election campaign.

Montero with a total of 226 videos, is the most active on the platform, after Jorge Buxadé, with 215 videos and Diana Riba, with 205. The other contenders post less: Dolors Montserrat (73), Alvisé Pérez (50), Estrella Galán (44), Toni Comín (38) and Jordi Cañas (14).

As shown by Table II Irene Montero, with 49 posts, which accounts for a quarter of the analyzed tiktoks (25.9%), published the most during the election campaign period. Estrella Galán posted 39 times, Jorge Buxadé 33, Toni Comín 22, Diana Riba and Alvisé Pérez 13, Dolors Montserrat and Jordi Cañas both published only 10 tiktoks each. It is important to note that one of the videos published by Alvisé Pérez was censored by the platform.

Table 2. Candidates, parties, TikTok account and number of posts.

Candidate	Party	TikTok account	Number of posts
Dolors Montserrat	PP	@dolorsmontserrat	10
Estrella Galán Sumar	Sumar	@estrellagalan_	39
Jordi Cañas	Ciudadanos	@jordi_canyas	10
Irene Montero	Podemos	@irenemontero_	49
Jorge Buxadé	VOX	@jorgebuxade	33
Toni Comín	Junts i lliures per Europa	@tonicomín	22
Diana Riba	Ahora Repúblicas (ERC, EH Bildu, BNG y Ara Més)	@dianaribamep_	13
Luis Pérez (Alvisé)	Se acabó la fiesta	@alviseperez	13
Teresa Ribera	PSOE	-	-
Oihane Agirregoitia	Oihane Agirregoitia (CEUS, Coalición por una Europa Solidaria	-	-

Source: Own elaboration.

4.1. Source

The analysis shows that most politicians understand that TikTok's broader cultural environment requires the production of exclusive/original content (López-Fernández, 2022): in total, 150 (79.4%) of the posts are original, and only 39 (20.6%) are shared. Dolors Montserrat, Jorge Buxadé, and Alvisé Pérez published the most original content—in fact, 100% of their publications were original—followed by Irene Montero (86.75%). Toni Comín (68.18%) and Jordi Cañas (60%) cross-post the most

content. Zooming in on the shared posts, the vast majority came from material published by their respective parties, such as interventions with party leaders, fragments of rallies, and electoral spots. News/media content appears only once: Toni Comín's account shared an interview with the Agència Catalana de Notícies.

4.2. Genre

A total of 164 publications—that is, 86.8% of the content shared by politicians—are videos. No candidate joins or proposes any challenges, which are the most popular (Abidin & Zeng, 2020) and algorithmically amplified content on the platform (Cotter et al, 2022). This suggests that while political actors produce exclusive content for the platform, they do not appear to adapt to TikTok's specific genres. Only Irene Montero, and only in one case, created content attributable to the "Stitch" genre (in which a creator comments on another creator's video by splitting the screen into two) to confront a statement made on the radio by journalist Ana Rosa Quintana.

A total of 12.7% of the posts are attributed to the "Other" category, since although they use a wide range of technical elements, they do not overtly adhere to any specific TikTok genres. Specifically, as we will analyze in the following section, Jorge Buxadé's videos integrate most of the platform's effects and technical tools. Likewise, Estrella Galán shares a video called "Cinco razones para votar a Sumar", which follows the aesthetic of the trending "Cinco razones para" challenge, but does not explicitly join the challenge, since the challenge hashtag is not present¹.

4.3. Style

Candidates' communication on TikTok centers around the campaign. Although most videos are produced exclusively for TikTok, only 31.2% of the content is recorded using the green-screen effect. Almost an equal share of videos, 30.7%, portray political rallies, understood as both meetings and/or visits to cities, neighborhoods, and so on.

Another frequent background type (17.5%) is what we term "campaign summaries," in which politicians share summaries of their campaign, showing different settings in the same video, and fragments of the politicians' interventions in electoral debates (15.9%). The least disseminated videos are campaign spots, totaling 9 (4.8%).

In their videos, candidates use a wide variety of camera shots, the most predominant being the medium close-up, in 86 cases (45.5%). The use of multiple formats—coded when the camera includes multiple shot types or is in motion—is used in 73 cases (38.6%), and wide-angle in 36 cases (19%).

It is worth noting that Irene Montero is the only candidate to use POV, the most popular TikTok shot effect (Simpson, & Semaan, 2021), although she uses it only twice.

A total of 170 videos (89.9%) are recorded professionally, using either video cameras or smartphones; only 12 videos are recorded by the candidates themselves as selfies (6.3%), and only 7 (3.7%) are homemade. Accordingly, it is reasonable to state that political actors rely more on a traditional, polished, and highly produced type of communication rather than adapting to TikTok's cultural environment, which prefers "raw" content (Zeng & Abidin, 2021) and, by enhancing a sense of authenticity (Riedl et al., 2023), could help foster their closeness to the audience (Grantham, 2024; Becker, 2021).

Politicians are the main protagonists of their videos in a total of 175 cases (92.6%). Since the selection of one category does not exclude the others, in 92 cases (48.7%) the anonymous audience can be considered the co-protagonist. As illustrated by Image 4, in Alvisé Pérez's videos followers are almost always prominent, helping the politician constructing an image of "man of the street"².

¹ <https://bit.ly/440zwzy>

² <https://bit.ly/4nbahrY>

Other political actors also become protagonists or co-protagonist in the videos, specifically, in a total of 68 (36%), whether they are party colleagues who support the them in their rallies, in videos of election debates or in videos in which the candidate mocks or criticises his or her rivals. Journalists are the least represented, appearing only in 15 of the cases (7.9%). In a total of 8 cases (4.2%), other actors appear, such as advisors or people who are part of the campaign team. In none of the cases the presence of celebrities or influencers has been retrieved.

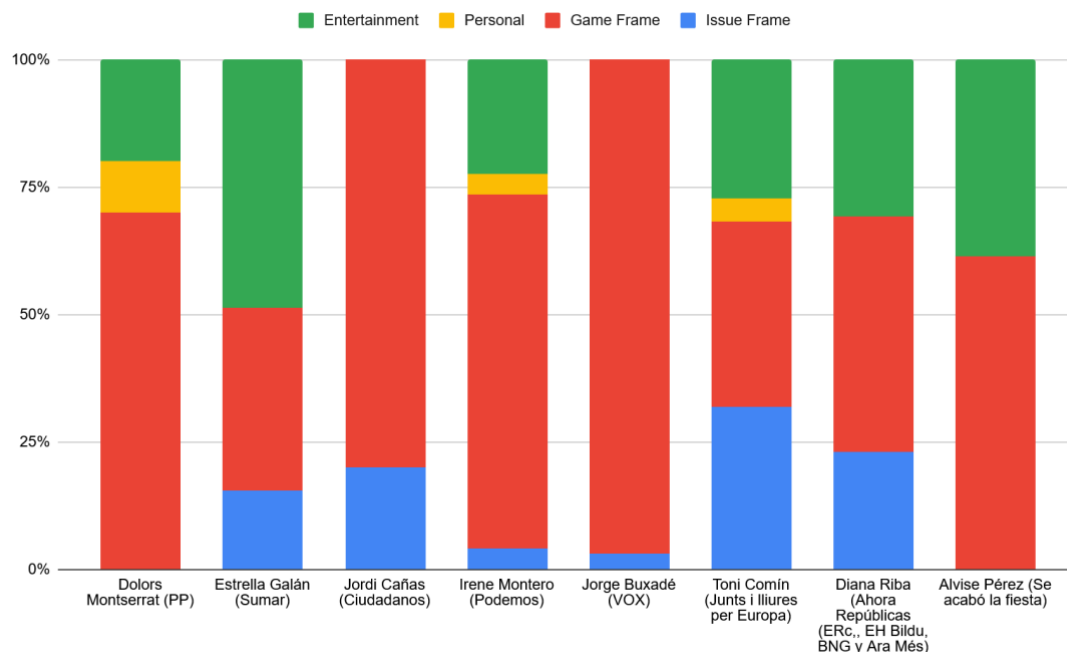
4.4. Format

The basic TikTok video format, that is, a video accompanied by text (normally a subtitle, often in larger, colored letters to improve readability), is used in 41.8% of cases; the most popular format on TikTok (Abidin, 2020)—video with effects, text, and music—is applied in a total of 44 cases (23.28%). To a lesser extent, 26 cases (13.76%) feature video with text and music. As previously mentioned, Jorge Buxadé's content appears to best exploit TikTok's affordances, combining effects, text, and music on 19 occasions. Irene Montero uses the video-and-text format the most, on 39 occasions, while Jordi Cañas does so on 7, and Diana Riba and Alvisé Pérez use it the least, on 2 and 1 times, respectively. Alvisé Pérez prioritizes videos with music on 5 occasions, while Toni Comín prefers video-only on 10 occasions, and Diana Riba prefers videos with text and music on 6 occasions. In any case, it is important to note that although some politicians use sound to emphasize their publications, in general—and contrary to what is found in other elections (Sadler, 2022)—music serves only an accompanying function. Candidates neither use trending sounds nor employ music as an integral part of their storytelling.

4.5. Content

Generically speaking, a great majority (73%) of the content of the tiktoks is political. Content related to entertainment only accounts for 24.9% and personal lives is the less frequent content (2.1%).

Graphic 1. Content of the videos per candidate.



Source: Own elaboration.

When it comes to political content, 61.9% of the posts are categorized as “game frame,” and only 11.1% as “issue frame.” As Figure 1 shows, although the “game frame” is prevalent for all analyzed candidates, Irene Montero and Jorge Buxadé use it the most. In 69.4% of her total publications, Podemos’ representative frames politics as a battle, while in the case of VOX’s candidate, it reaches 97%.

As mentioned, the pure entertainment category—defined as content unrelated to politics and shared only for entertainment purposes—is much lower. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that only Cañas and Buxadé add no entertaining features to their posts. Estrella Galán is the only candidate who openly draws from entertainment (48.7%). In particular, she published a video in which she compares herself to the video game *Mario Kart*, using the image from the game itself and mimicking its slogan by stating that “Estrella makes you move forward.” In the case of Irene Montero, entertainment (22.4%) intersects with personal content: in one case, for instance, she shares a tutorial explaining how to pack essential clothes for traveling; in another, she shares her appreciation for regional food, such as horchata, and her collaborators mock her for being too talkative. In Diana Riba’s (46.2%) posts, entertainment is often mixed with political content: in a video, for instance, she mocks another candidate using montage. Alvisé Pérez publishes selfie videos with his followers (38.5%). Toni Comín (27.3%) posts summary videos of campaign events while showing how he prepares for his speeches. As per the politicians’ personal life, a big difference can be observed: Galán, Cañas, Buxadé, Riba and Pérez never share their personal lives with the audience, and only Montero, Comín and Montserrat talk about their personal lives. Irene Montero shares one video related to her private life. The video, recorded from her home, is dedicated to thank followers for their support while the scratching her family happened³. Dolors Montserrat shows a spot on the Camino de Santiago that she walked with her family, but, above all, she shows relaxed campaign moments in which she greets people who follow her. In the case of Toni Comín, the ACN gives him a quick interview with questions about his tastes and hobbies. In most cases, however, they share their private side within the context of the election campaign. Their more human side is presented to their followers by showing back-stage moments, such as them taking a break from campaigning by eating a snack or drinking coffee. Notably, Sumar’s candidate often adds comments about her being tired to her “summary of the campaign” videos. Finally, it is important to mention that, contrary to what happens in other countries (Grantham, 2024), no families or relatives are portrayed.

4.6. Topics

This category is not exclusive: in many videos politicians tackled diverse topics. That being said, Spanish politics is more central than European politics, accounting for 42.32% of the video content. European issues occupy only 22.22% of the total content. Nevertheless, important differences emerge. Jordi Cañas is the candidate who talks most about internal Spanish issues, in 70% of his posts, where he criticizes the Spanish government and the Amnesty Law. Jorge Buxadé talks about Spain’s internal affairs in 63.64% of his posts; Toni Comín does so in 59.09% of his posts. Likewise, Jorge Buxadé is the candidate who talks most about Europe, in 51.52% of his posts, followed by Jordi Cañas, who does so on 40% of occasions, and Diana Riba, on 23.08% of occasions. Dolors Montserrat does not talk about Europe: 60% of her posts are dedicated to internal issues, particularly criticizing PSOE, the Spanish governing party. Similarly, Alvisé Pérez ignores Europe in his communication.

³ <https://bit.ly/43Pydtm>

Sumar's representative (Estrella Galán) defends the need to promote social advances and the fight against climate change at a European level, although she criticizes the fact that Europe is currently adrift due to its austerity policies and the rise of the extreme right. VOX's nominee fiercely criticizes the 2030 Agenda and the Green Deal, prioritizing the defense of Spain and the fight against illegal immigration.

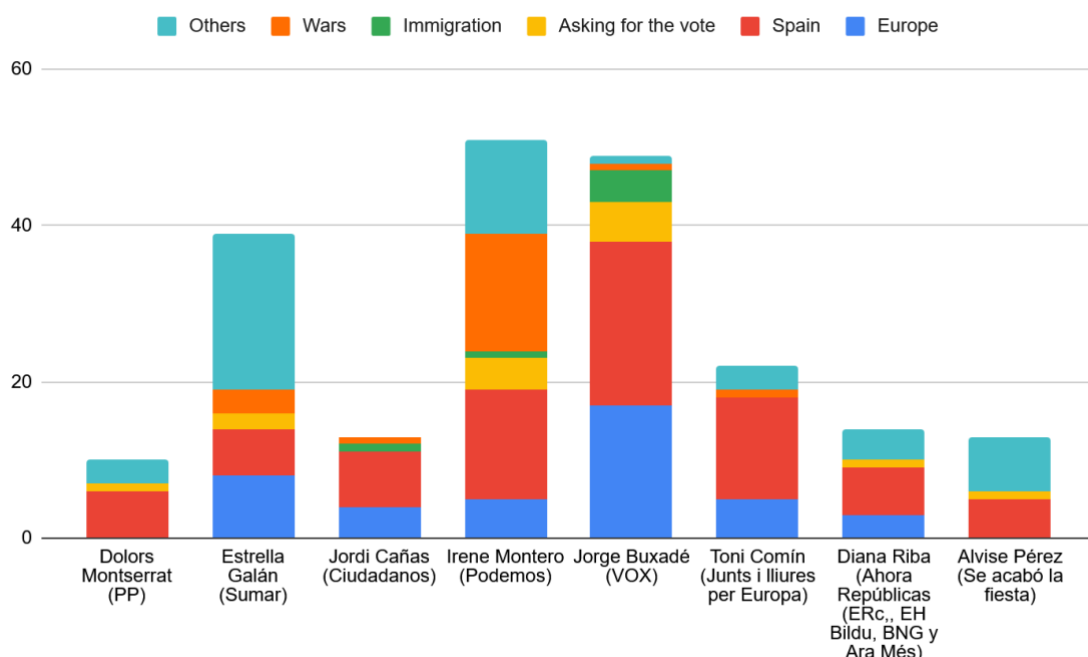
It is worth noting that the candidates introduce the Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Palestine wars as topics in 11.11% of their posts. Irene Montero by far tackles wars the most, in 30.61% of her posts. Specifically, her content is dedicated to advocating for peace. In addition, Estrella Galán addresses the wars in 7.69% of her posts, taking the same position about the situation of Palestine, Ukraine, and the Saharawi people. Alvisé Pérez, Dolors Montserrat, and Diana Riba never mention either of the two wars, and the rest of the politicians refer to them only marginally.

Unsurprisingly, Toni Comín and Diana Riba, representing independence coalitions, are the candidates that center most of their content on specific issues—specifically the struggle for Catalan independence, the Amnesty Law, and the official status of the Catalan language, among others. In this sense, almost all of their content, even when mentioning European or Spanish institutions, refers to the aforementioned issues.

Immigration is mostly dealt with by VOX's candidate, in 12.15% of his posts. Jorge Buxadé warns that Europe is in danger and talks about the need to create alliances between European parties to tackle immigration and continue building a “Christian Europe.”

As mentioned, the “Other” category collects content that does not explicitly refer to the other categories and represents 26.5% of all posts. In the case of Alvisé Pérez, it is important to note that most of his content—specifically 53.8% of his posts—has been assigned to the “Other” category since he does not speak; rather, he shares video selfies surrounded by people and followers.

Graphic 2. Main topics.



Source: Own elaboration.

4.7. Interaction

In a large majority of the analyzed videos, 141 (83.43%), political actors use TikTok as a form of promotion. Interestingly, in none of the cases do candidates overtly promote debate or discussion. On the other hand, participation is present in a total of 28 cases (16.57%). However, it is important to note that politicians mobilize voters primarily by asking them to vote for them; they rarely invite the audience to actively get involved in politics. Estrella Galán is the contender who asks her followers to vote the most, on 13 occasions, followed by Irene Montero, on 8 occasions. Jorge Buxadé asks for votes two times, while the rest ask for votes once. Therefore, it is possible to observe that all the analyzed politicians appear not to believe that TikTok can be a source of dialogue with their constituents.

4.8. Engagement

Social media engagement refers to the level of user interaction –such as likes, shares, or comments– with a post on a social media platform (Sigerson & Cheng, 2018). Recognizing that engagement can be calculated in various ways (Herencia, 2020) and considering the unique features of each platform, we employed the following formula suggested by Chen et al. (2021) to measure engagement on TikTok:

$$[(\text{number of likes} + \text{number of comments} + \text{number of shares})/\text{number of views}] \times 100$$

Table 3. Engagement rates.

Candidate	Number of posts	Likes	Comments	Shares	Views	Number of followers	Engagement rate
Dolors Montserrat (PP)	10	5,101	336	213	91,689	12,000	6.1
Estrella Galán (Sumar)	39	9,342	1,523	1,105	178,026	1,101	6.7
Jordi Cañas (Ciudadanos)	10	693	78	37	10,990	1,630	7.3
Irene Montero (Podemos)	49	183,729	27,319	9,931	3,119,008	87,700	7.08
Jorge Buxadé (VOX)	33	79,311	5,113	6,413	953,343	85,600	9.5
Toni Comín (Junts i lliures per Europa)	22	7,648	841	386	120,416	1,350	7.3
Diana Riba (Ahora Repúblicas (ERC, EH Bildu, BNG, y Ara Més))	13	526	31	69	14,280	4,167	4.3
Alvise Pérez (Se acabó la fiesta)	13	312,292	7,628	22,837	4,637,800	281,100	7.3

	Highest values
	Lowest values

Source: Own elaboration.

As shown by Table III, Alvise Pérez is the candidate with the most followers (273,800), followed by Irene Montero (87,200) and Jorge Buxadé (85,000). PP's candidate, Dolors Montserrat, has 12,000, Diana Riba around 4,000, and the others around 1,000. Estrella Galán, with 1,101 followers, has the fewest, due to her late entry onto this platform.

Alvise Pérez's publications received the most likes (312,292), followed by Irene Montero's (183,729) and far ahead of the other candidates. Jordi Cañas (693) and Diana Riba (526) were the candidates with the fewest likes. Irene Montero was the candidate with the most comments on her posts (27,319), followed by Alvise Pérez (7,628).

Alvise Pérez's videos were the most shared, at 22,837 times, while those of Jordi Cañas were the least, at 37. Alvise Pérez was also the candidate with the most views (4,637,800), followed by Irene Montero (3,119,008), both far ahead of the other candidates, although the closest was Jorge Buxadé (953,343).

Jorge Buxadé is the candidate with the highest level of engagement (9.5%), while Diana Riba has the least engagement (4.3%). The rest of the candidates fall between 6% and 7%.

However, if we look at individual videos, the post with the highest engagement percentage is by Estrella Galán, in which she condemns the genocide in Gaza (29.5%), followed by a video by Jorge Buxadé, where he speaks out against the European Green Deal (21.28%). These two videos also have the highest individual engagement for each candidate, followed by the video where Irene Montero speaks out against the far right and a potential pact between the PP and Giorgia Meloni's party (18.92%). In this sense, it is possible to conclude that emotional and inflammatory content seems to boost engagement.

It should be noted that such metrics tend to systematically penalize profiles with a larger follower base, as the ratio denominator (number of followers) dilutes absolute levels of interaction (Bode et al., 2020). This can be seen if we compare the profiles of Alvise Pérez with those of Jordi Cañas or Toni Comín. This distortion can lead to inaccurate interpretations when comparing actors with audiences of very different sizes. Engagement is not always a direct reflection of political influence or mobilization capacity, but can be conditioned by factors such as perceived authenticity, media notoriety, or even the type of content published (Enli, 2017b; Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The study reveals that most of the main candidates for the European elections in Spain are present on TikTok. However, Teresa Ribera (PSOE) and Oihane Agirregoitia (CEUS) do not have accounts on the platform. Therefore, our hypothesis (H1) that all Spanish candidates integrate TikTok into their communication strategies cannot be confirmed.

Delving deeper and addressing our first research question (RQ1), while most candidates have incorporated TikTok into their communication strategies, we cannot conclude that they are effectively leveraging the platform's unique affordances and vernaculars. All analyzed candidates, in fact, appear to underutilize TikTok's features, which favor short, highly visual, and entertainment-driven content. Our findings indicate that politicians seem unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the tools provided by the platform and have yet to adapt to its specific cultural and stylistic norms, which are geared toward a younger audience (Abidin & Zeng, 2020).

Although platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have become integral to political communication efforts (Casero-Ripollés & López-López, 2024), the use of TikTok by political parties remains inconsistent. This suggests that keeping pace with new cultural and technological innovations is still a work in progress for most Spanish parties.

It is also worth noting that candidates provide minimal detail about their policy proposals, focusing primarily on the "game frame"—criticizing or mocking their rivals.

Politics is predominantly represented as a polarized battlefield where attacking opponents takes precedence over promoting goals.

Similarly, in contrast to research from other countries (Montúfar-Calle, et. al, 2022; Grantham, 2024), personal aspects of political actors' lives are rarely shared. When they are, it is always within the context of the electoral campaign. For example, no candidate—except Irene Montero on one occasion—reveals private aspects of their lives, such as information about their partner, children, or home.

Turning to RQ2, which examines differences between “old” and “new” parties, our findings indicate that Podemos, VOX, and the challenger Alwise Pérez perform better in terms of entertainment value and demonstrate a stronger understanding of TikTok's functionality. They apply specific techniques and engage with trending vernaculars more effectively. While VOX and Podemos can no longer be considered “new” parties, our results suggest that populist parties are better equipped to adapt to TikTok's emotional vernaculars, aligning with Castro Martínez and Días Morilla (2021). This supports Gerbaudo's (2018) hypothesis regarding the existence of an elective affinity between populist parties and social media.

Finally, in response to RQ3, our results show that, as stated in our H3, European campaigns are mostly interpreted as an opportunity to focus on domestic politics, confirming the findings of previous studies (Bartels, 2023; Navarro-Sierra & Quevedo-Redondo, 2020). Nonetheless, we observed that certain global topics, such as the situation in Gaza, resonate particularly well with younger audiences. This highlights the importance of selecting appropriate topics for the platform to capture attention effectively.

In conclusion, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of our study. By focusing exclusively on Spain, the generalizability of our findings is not guaranteed. Accordingly, future research should adopt a comparative approach to further test the existence of an elective affinity between populist parties and social media, to uncover global trends in TikTok usage, or to determine whether such usage is closely tied to specific political systems or cultures.

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