



Political communication strategies used in the three-way debate prior to the general elections of 23 July 2023: a qualitative analysis

Estrategias de comunicación política en el debate electoral a tres: un análisis cualitativo del 23-J

Inmaculada Melero López

Universidad de Murcia

Inmaculada.melero@um.es

received: 17.04.2026 / accepted: 15.06.2026

Referencia de este artículo

Melero López, Inmaculada (2026). Political communication strategies used in the three-way debate prior to the general elections of 23 July 2023: a qualitative analysis. *adComunica. Revista Científica de Estrategias, Tendencias e Innovación en Comunicación*, nº32. Castellón de la Plana: Departamento de Ciencias de la Comunicación de la Universitat Jaume I, 203-226. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.9559>

KEYWORDS

Election Debate, Communication Strategies, Political Discourse, Election Campaign, Agendas, Three-Way Debate.

PALABRAS CLAVE

debate electoral, estrategias comunicativas, discursos políticos, campaña electoral, agendas, debate a tres.

ABSTRACT

This research analyses the communication strategies used by candidates in the three-way debate prior to the 2023 general elections in Spain. Through qualitative content analysis, the authors have explored the main issues, propositional and conflictive frames, the use of storytelling as a rhetorical device, the golden minute, and non-verbal language. The findings indicate that the candidates from the progressive bloc, namely Pedro Sánchez and Yolanda Díaz, articulated a broad agenda defined by a propositional tone, along with considerable strategic collaboration. By contrast, the leader of Vox took a critical and belligerent stance toward the current party's governance, placing the focus on perceived legislative weakness by using a polarising discourse. The absence of the People's Party candidate from the RTVE debate could have contributed to greater discursive polarization. This scenario, characterized by the empty chair effect, appears to have fostered a more antagonistic exchange that not only affected the contextual narrative but potentially extended to the confrontation over electoral programs.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación presenta un análisis de las estrategias comunicativas empleadas por los candidatos en el debate a tres de las elecciones generales de 2023 en España. Mediante una metodología de análisis de contenido cualitativo, se examinan los ejes temáticos, los encuadres (propositivos y de conflicto), el uso del storytelling como recurso retórico, el minuto de oro y el lenguaje no verbal. Las conclusiones indican que los candidatos del bloque progresista, Pedro Sánchez y Yolanda Díaz, articularon una amplia agenda temática, caracterizada por un tono propositivo y una notable complicidad estratégica. Por el contrario, el líder de Vox mantuvo un perfil crítico y beligerante hacia la gestión gubernamental, priorizando las debilidades legislativas y el empleo de un discurso polarizante. La ausencia del candidato del Partido Popular en el debate de RTVE podría haber contribuido a una mayor polarización discursiva. Este escenario, caracterizado por el efecto silla vacía, parece haber propiciado un intercambio más antagónico que no solo afectó a la narrativa coyuntural, sino que posiblemente se extendió a la confrontación de los programas electorales.

AUTHOR

Inmaculada Melero López [Inmaculada.melero@um.es] is Lecturer at the University of Murcia. PhD in Political Science and Public Administration from the University of Murcia. Coordinator of the Master's Degree in Applied Political Analysis. Secretary of the Latin American Association of Researchers in Electoral Campaigns (ALICE). Researcher at the Murcian Centre for Public Opinion Studies (CEMOP). Coordinator of the political communication journal *Más Poder Local*.

1. Introduction

Debates play a key role in the developing and sending messages during election campaigns, not only as a result of the valuable information voters obtain about the candidates, but also due to the scope of the communications received and the expectations they engender among audiences (Herrero and Benoit, 2009). Politicians rely on narratives that project a positive image, attract voters, and legitimise their power. To this end, they use various instruments to share their viewpoint, such as social media, campaign rallies, and electoral debates, all of which have a communicative effect on the audience (De Fina, 2023). Consequently, debates provide information by allowing politicians to explain key political issues and possible solutions to the public, yet they also engage voters and encourage them to become more involved in the political process (Crespo et al, 2011; Best and Hubbard, 1999). Above all, debates are a resource used in electoral campaigns that help legitimise the democratic system, political parties, and elites (Moreno, 2010).

This research explores the communication strategies available to candidates during electoral debates, yet without addressing neither the negotiations that take place prior to such events, nor the effects of these debates on voting decisions. Specifically, the aim of this study is to examine the tactics used by political candidates in the last election debate, held on 19 July 2023, which was a forerunner to the general elections in Spain that took place on 23 July 2023.

The so-called *three-way debate* is a crucial object of study due to its uneven arrangement. Regarding the debate in question, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who was the candidate for the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), participated alongside Yolanda Díaz, the leader of Sumar, and Santiago Abascal, who represented Vox. However, the significance of the event was the absence of Alberto Núñez Feijóo, candidate of the Popular Party (PP) and opposition leader, who declined the invitation from RTVE. The fact that a prominent figure failed to attend, despite leading the opinion polls at the time, redefined both the agenda and the interaction between the participants, in addition to causing a media impact due to the *empty chair* effect resulting from Feijóo's absence from the debate. This entire situation took place in a context where interaction between digital platforms and social media occurred in real time, thereby enabling measurement of the polarisation, tone, and engagement generated by these political leaders in digital environments. Although Alberto Núñez Feijóo refused to participate in the debate, he accepted an invitation from Atresmedia (a private media company) to engage in a face-to-face debate with Pedro Sánchez just nine days earlier. Later, in the debate under study, Feijóo's failure to attend allowed Pedro Sánchez and Yolanda Díaz to focus their criticism on his absence and on Vox's policies. This prompted the leader of the green party to debate issues such

as post-election alliances, as well as the possibility of coalition governments involving the PP and Vox, or PSOE and Sumar. The analysis of this three-way debate is an original contribution to this field of study, as the academic literature on electoral debates in Spain has traditionally focused on the one-to-one format.

Despite growing academic interest in election debates in Spain, most studies have focused on formats that were either two-party or four-party, paying less attention to three-party scenarios resulting from the non-attendance of one of the main players. This paper will attempt to fill the gap by analysing the three-way debate prior to the general elections of 23 July 2023 by focusing on the discursive, narrative, and non-verbal strategies used by the candidates. Furthermore, it is imperative to underscore that the value of this study lies not only in the synchronic analysis of the 2023 debate, but also in its methodological approach. By systematically synthesizing discourse analysis in conjunction with content analysis, non-verbal communication, and AI assistance, this research provides a comprehensive and transposable analytical paradigm for the examination of future debates in multiparty contexts.

2. Theoretical review

Although election debates in Spain have taken place continuously since 2008, this phenomenon is not an established practice, largely due to the fact that the Organic Law on the General Electoral System (LOREG) does not make them mandatory (Lagares Diez et al., 2020). This absence of a legal mandate explains why, unlike well-established democracies such as the United States, debates were traditionally the exception in Spanish campaigns before the encounter between Mariano Rajoy and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in 2008 (Garrido and Sierra, 2013).

Traditional research on political communication has explored electoral debates based on the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2007), which categorises messages into acclaims, attacks, and defences. However, the research at hand analyses the communication strategies used in these campaign events. To this end, the authors have considered instruments such as assigning topics, the framing of narratives and their relationship with storytelling, candidates' golden minute, and non-verbal language.

Election debates are tools that help clarify the main issues of political leaders. In other words, they perform an agenda-setting role where candidates compete to place certain issues in a better position, which consist of topics that are part of their agenda (McCombs, 2006). In this way, both the public agenda and that of the media have access to countless issues that attract their attention (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003), which confirms that debates not only influence voter behaviour, but they also

shape the public's perception of priority issues and leadership styles (Reina & Cruz, 2025). The objective of candidates is not to refute opposing arguments, but to ensure that their own issues prevail in the debate (Morris, 1999). This impact on issues is not limited to the debate itself, as it also spreads to value judgements and polls published after the encounter, with regard to the possible winners and losers of the event (Garrido and Sierra, 2013). However, it should be noted that election debates are the culmination of prior negotiations that determine the general topic categories to be addressed. Moreover, this pre-set procedure limits the participants' ability to introduce or develop new issues during the debate itself (Castromil and Rodríguez, 2019).

Within the scope of electoral praxis, political leaders employ cognitive framing as a high-precision discursive mechanism. Through this technique, they aim to prioritize specific aspects of the debate over others, thereby defining the terms in which citizens process and evaluate political proposals. For Entnam (1993), framing is a process of selecting content and highlighting certain events that promote specific interpretations, evaluations, and solutions. In debates, framing allows certain content to be emphasised over other material in order to guide audiences toward what they need to contemplate, and how they need to contemplate it (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). There are different types of framing, depending on the specific objectives and purposes of its use. One of the main classifications of framing distinguishes between two types: generic frames, which address broad topics, thereby enabling comparisons and the generalisation of results; and specific frames, which focus on a single topic in a given context and, although generalisation is difficult, this type of framing enhances the depth of analysis in specific cases (De Vreese et al., 2001). By delving deeper into generic news frames, the classic typology with the greatest impact was set forth by Neuman, Just and Crigler in 1992, who identified frames of conflict, human interest, economic consequences, moral judgements, and placing blame. The study at hand has used the conflict frame, which refers to presenting combative interests. This informational frame focuses on negativity and the shortcomings attributed to rival leaders, parties or institutions, which can have adverse effects on the public's perception of these individuals and groups (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). The present study also uses propositional framing, which focuses attention on issues of general concern to citizens (Iyengar, 1991; Muñiz et al., 2018). A fundamental premise to consider is that while scholars such as McCombs (2006) or Hänggli and Kriesi (2012) have already highlighted the importance of issue and content emphasis, this research proposes that in systems with ideologically similar blocs, this emphasis is not merely individual but coordinated to enhance the overall efficiency of the bloc.

To articulate their communication strategy, political leaders also use storytelling, which is an essential resource that complements framing. This instrument enables politicians to make an idea more meaningful by narrating a story, which is essential

for adding substance and depth to the discourse (Sarasqueta et al, 2025). Storytelling involves a thought process that allows people to see politics not as a list of facts or rational policies, but through narratives that give meaning and coherence to events. This produces an emotional connection and empathy between the candidate and the audience, which drives political action such as going out to vote (Seargenat, 2022).

The use of communicative strategies and framing reaches its peak in the final stretch of the debate, which is known as the golden minute. This final segment is a microcosm of political discourse, which unfolds in a short space of time, when candidates face the challenge of consolidating their message, making an emotional link with the audience, and rallying the people to vote. To achieve this objective, the golden minute is defined by a high concentration of rhetorical and linguistic techniques, which allow candidates to present a concise selection of arguments and proposals (Ouahmane, 2025). This combination of emotion and persuasion, supported by strong arguments, enables uninterrupted speech, which simulates the discursive effectiveness of a political rally (Gallardo Paúls, 2021).

Beyond the verbal discourse presented by political leaders, non-verbal language also plays a major role in election debates due to the importance of gestures, posturing, and positioning (Corraze, 1986). The main tenet of communication is that everything said or done conveys a message, whether voluntarily or involuntarily (Watzlawick et al., 1971). Lobillo Mora and Hernández Cruz (2025) analysed the non-verbal language of the candidates during the 2023 general election campaign on the televised programmes *El Hormiguero* and *Cara a Cara: El Debate*. Their conclusions reveal a significant contrast in gestural discourse: Pedro Sánchez, the Prime Minister at the time, used non-verbal language, including aggressive gestures. On the other hand, although the leader of the opposition party, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, was calmer, he appeared to be uneasy.

3. Context of the three-way debate

The aim of this research is to analyse the three-way debate in question, yet the authors have excluded the one-to-one debate held just nine days earlier for a specific reason, which is the following: Since 2015, when Podemos and Ciudadanos burst onto the political scene and the parliament became much more complex, the debates started to change from a two-way format to a four-way style. Nevertheless, although formats with more participants have become an electoral routine in recent years, the winner/loser dynamic has been eliminated, and the struggle is now to set the agenda (Castromil and Rodríguez, 2019). Moreover, this entire situation was accompanied by high audience ratings, with RTVE leading the way with a 34.6%

viewer share, and nearly eight million spectators watching the debate at some point (Prensa RTVE, 2023).

The three-way debate took place in a highly competitive and polarised political environment. The debate not only allowed the opponents to present their proposals, but it enabled ideological confrontation and the construction of persuasive narratives (Ouahmane, 2025).

Furthermore, according to the Third National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by CEMOP, the levels of affective polarisation during the election campaign of 2023 (4.56) were higher than in 2022 (4.40), and 2021 (3.98). In fact, the same report revealed a bit of information that was crucial for analysing the debate: the report found that each bloc (Sumar and PSOE on the left and PP and Vox on the right) showed positive feelings toward the two leaders of their own political spectrum, yet they displayed negative feelings toward the two candidates of the opposing bloc (Crespo, 2023). Moreover, this data might explain much of the rhetoric used by the participants in the three-way debate.

4. Methodology

As the aim of this research is to describe the communication strategies of political candidates in the last electoral debate in Spain, a case study (Coller, 2005) was carried out using qualitative content analysis (Díaz Herrera, 2018). This technique allows data to be processed in a non-numerical way in order to identify patterns, themes, and meanings.

It provides an interpretation of context, emotion, and motivation for the purpose of gaining a detailed understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Riba Campos, 2010). In the present research, information from a three-way debate has been systematically categorised to obtain valuable data on the communication strategies used by the candidates during the televised event.

The debate took place on 19 July 2023 on public television¹, and the candidates included Pedro Sánchez of the PSOE, Santiago Abascal of VOX, and Yolanda Díaz of

1 The entire debate is available at the following RTVE website: <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/especiales-informativos/23j-debate-final-debate-elecciones-generales-espana-2023/6938109/>

Sumar. The study at hand examines the participants' statements in the three segments of the 90-minute debate, which included the economy, social policy, and state-related and post-election agreements.

To describe the communication strategies of political candidates in the tripartite electoral debate of July 23, 2023, by analyzing thematic agenda management, the use of frames (propositive and conflict- based), storytelling construction, delivery in the golden minute, and the impact of non-verbal communication.

Derived from the research question, the following hypothesis is formulated:

The simultaneous participation of two candidates from the same bloc favors a strategy of thematic complementarity and propositive framing aimed at maximizing the bloc's electoral gains while avoiding discursive redundancy, whereas conflict frames, antagonistic storytelling, and confrontational body language are asymmetrically directed toward the candidate from the opposing ideological spectrum.

To operationalize the content analysis of the communication strategies used by the leaders in the debate, the following variables have been considered:

- Main issues and sub-issues: in the segments stipulated above, the political candidates present their main election agenda including issues and sub-issues. Based on the distinct topics presented by each candidate, a comparison is made between the different participants in the debate. The coding of this variable accounts for the themes and subthemes mentioned by the candidates within each thematic intervention. Consequently, while the analysis is conducted inductively, it identifies recurring topics such as employment, housing, the 'Only Yes Means Yes' law, and others.
- Propositional framing: the aim here is to identify propositional attitudes manifested through initiatives and public policy proposals aimed at resolving problems, yet from the viewpoint of a discourse perspective rather than from the construction of issues. An example of this variable is the presence of verbs such as 'we will do', 'we will lower', or 'we commit to', among others. All these interventions must represent a solution to a specific problem or a formal political commitment.
- Conflict framing: a certain level of disagreement between the candidates was noted, along with criticism and differing positions on the issues discussed. This frame is coded when the use of direct appeals to the adversary, confrontational language, interruptions, or rebuttals ("you are lying", "that data is false", "your management was a disaster") is detected. Therefore, this variable is present when

the focus of the message is an attack on the opponent's credibility or record, rather than an explanation of the candidate's own policy measures.

- **Storytelling:** the three-part structure of a story, including order, disorder, and the new order, along with the purpose of the narrative, have been identified. The analysis details the presence of the protagonist, the nature of the conflict, the implicit moral message, and the core value that the speaker tries to highlight. In this case, the model proposed by Sarasqueta et al. (2025) is applied, requiring the identification of a character (e.g., the citizen, the worker, the 'villainous' politician) and a moral value (e.g., justice, freedom, order).
- **Golden minute:** the final message conveyed by each candidate has been thoroughly examined in order to identify how they communicate their messages, the content conveyed, and the feelings and emotions they try to arouse in their audiences.
- **Non-verbal language:** although not communicated in a spoken way, highly important messages have been conveyed through the facial expressions, gazes, gestures, and bodily postures of the participants, which have also been explored. To this end, the participants' facial expressions, gaze, gestures, and body posture are analyzed. Specifically, the presence of micro-expressions of contempt, ironic smiles, defiant eye contact with the camera or the opponent, and the use of hands as emphasizees are taken into account. Furthermore, the analysis codes any gesticulation that either contradicts or reinforces the tone of the verbal message.

For the analysis, the interventions of the political leaders are taken as the fundamental units. Operationally, the analysis units are defined by themes, taking into account that the debate is divided into three thematic segments: economy, social policies, and state pacts and post-electoral pacts. Therefore, each discourse segment with complete meaning in which a candidate expresses an idea, proposal, or critique regarding a specific issue constitutes a unit of analysis. This criterion allowed for the fragmentation of the 90-minute broadcast into a corpus of approximately one hundred thematic units distributed across the three official segments of the debate. Within each of these units, given the complex nature of televised discourse, a rigid isolation is not sought; instead, the simultaneous coexistence of one or more qualitative variables is assumed.

The coding procedure was carried out in a strictly inductive manner, adapting the process at all times to the peculiarities and contingencies of the live broadcast. This means that the codebook was not pre-established, but rather constructed from the analysis of the interventions of the candidates who participated in the debate. This

approach allowed the subthemes and categories to emerge from the empirical data, rather than imposing a predefined codebook. Although the research follows a qualitative-descriptive approach that avoids the fragmentary quantification of discourse, the rigor of the analysis is grounded in the identification of patterns of recurrence through a systematic coding and retrieval assisted by Atlas.ti 9 software. In this way, the comparative claims made in the results section arise from a rigorous observation of the prevalence and saturation of certain discursive strategies over others.

Data systematization was supported by Atlas.ti 9 software, which enabled a structured organization using quotations and code families. This procedure facilitates a comparison between the analysis units of the different candidates, ensuring that the descriptive analysis maintains direct traceability between the theoretical categories and the analyzed discursive fragments. The Atlas.ti 9 software was utilized by assigning codes to the analyzed paragraphs of the debate, which had been previously transcribed. Therefore, after reading the paragraphs corresponding to the leaders' interventions—and thus to the units of analysis—codes were assigned, operationalizing the variables through these codes. The codes represent both the variables that operationalize the concepts and specific subthemes that were defined inductively. For instance, some of the codes used include: "labor and social agendas", "progressive alliances", "taxation" or "gender ideology" when dealing with agenda topics mentioned during the debate.

The systematization of the data was supported by the Atlas.ti 9 software, which enabled a structured organization using nodes and code families.

This artificial intelligence tool was used exclusively as a visual support resource to facilitate the readability and flow of the text. Consequently, the creation of the diagrams reflects a process of AI-assisted generation, in which the author provided the conceptual direction, the selection of variables, and the prompt specifications, while the AI's role was strictly confined to the graphical representation of the content. The use of both tools is therefore restricted to an instrumental function of visual presentation under the strict intellectual control of the researcher.

5. Results

5.1. Main issues and sub-issues

The aim of the first variable was to identify the issues discussed in the three-way debate, as well as the priorities of the leaders who participated.

Table 1. Identification of the main issues and sub-issues for each of the different segments.

Economics segment		
Candidate	Main issues	Sub-issues
Pedro Sánchez	Economic recovery	The pandemic and war management. Protection for workers, the self-employed, and SMEs.
	Employment and wages	Job creation. Labour reform. Increase in the minimum wage.
	Fiscal policy	Reduction in personal income tax. Revaluation of pensions. Offering a living minimum wage.
	Ecological transition	Climate Change Law. Clean Energy.
Yolanda Díaz	Green production strategy	Ecological re-industrialisation. Green jobs.
	Labour policy	Reduction in working hours. Improvement in labour conditions.
	Fiscal policy	Progressive reform. Taxes on large companies.
	Housing and consumption	Anti-inflation measures: basic food basket, rent, mortgages.
Santiago Abascal	Criticism of the current economic model	Impoverishment of the country. Rejection of the 2030 Agenda.
	Energy and production	Reopening of thermal power plants. Hydrologic plan. Rejection of climate change law.
	Taxation	Tax cuts. Two-income tax brackets. Self-employed contributions. Political spending.
Social Policy Segment		
Candidate	Main issues	Sub-issues and specific proposals
Pedro Sánchez	The welfare state	Public health. Dependency. Scholarships for vocational training.
	Equality and rights	“Yes means yes” law, equality, and LGTBI. Maternity/paternity leave. Funding to combat gender violence.
	Housing	Housing Act: public housing stock and rent control. Energy restoration.
	Education	Progressive improvement and free vocational training.

Social Policy Segment		
Candidate	Main issues	Sub-issues and specific proposals
Yolanda Díaz	Health care and related items	Law on maximum waiting times. Primary care and attention to mental health. Public dental care.
	Feminism and equality	Reduction of disparities. 32 weeks' leave. Defence of abortion and the trans law.
	Education	Free school meals. Dignity for teachers. Reduction of segregation.
	Housing	Public rental housing. Rent control. Protection against vulture funds.
Santiago Abascal	Safety and the family	Criticism of the "yes means yes" law. Defence of women's safety.
	Gender ideology	Rejection of the trans law.
State and post-electoral agreement segment		
Candidate	Main issues	Sub-issues and specific proposals
Pedro Sánchez	Progressive alliances	Coalition with Sumar. Rejection of the PP-Vox pact.
	Regional model	Dialogue with Catalonia and the Basque Country. Defence of the Regional State system.
	Democracy and rights	Constitutional enforcement. Migration.
Yolanda Díaz	Social and cultural agreements	Agreement regarding culture without censorship.
	Governmental relations	Collaboration with the PSOE for political autonomy
	Labour and social agenda	Reduction of working hours. Salary improvement. Social dialogue.
Santiago Abascal	Agreements regarding national sovereignty	Rejection of agreements with separatists. Consultation of the people regarding art. 92 CE.
	The constitution and national unity	Reversal of decentralization.
	Foreign policy	Criticism of sovereignty transfer to the EU.

Source: created by the authors.

Table I outlines the main issues and their respective sub-issues within the three major segments that comprised the debate. The heterogeneity of the major categories enlivened the exchange. However, it bears mentioning that this resulted from negotiations between the television station and the candidates' teams of advisers prior to the debate. This preliminary agreement prioritised the economy, social policy, and post-election governance over other areas of public interest.

Specifically, the category related to state pacts and governmental alliances was strategically exploited by Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) and Yolanda Díaz (Sumar). Both leaders articulated a rhetoric aimed at continuing their coalition established in 2020. It also bears mentioning that Díaz' career path in the executive branch of government has been on the rise: After leading the Ministry of Social Labour and Economy, she assumed the role of Third Vice President in March of 2021, following the resignation of Pablo Iglesias. Subsequently, she held the position of Second Vice-President after the cabinet was reshuffled in July of the same year. Thus, the discourse analysis reveals a deliberate convergence toward the re-establishment of alliances between the PSOE and Sumar, which is a somewhat novel phenomenon in the tradition of Spanish election debates, where coalitions have historically been depicted as a second-best option with a negative connotation.

Regarding Santiago Abascal, the Vox leader focused his speech mainly on the economy, but from the standpoint of criticism. His arguments focused on rejecting the 2030 Agenda, opposing the water resource plan, and criticising the climate change law, linking these issues to energy and production. On fiscal matters, he strongly defended both tax cuts and public spending reductions.

Consequently, Abascal scarcely elaborated on traditional social policy initiatives. His speech focused more on criticising the "yes means yes" law, defending the safety of women and the family, and the outright rejection of what he calls the "gender ideology". In contrast, left-wing leaders prioritized specific proposals in key social areas such as housing, education, feminism, healthcare, and equality, thus demonstrating a clear thematic polarization in the discursive agenda during the tripartite debate.

5.2. Propositional framing

Another aim of this research is to identify the propositional framing used by the participants regarding their narrative strategies and positions related to the issues.

Figure 1. Examples of propositional framing used by the candidates.

Source: created by the authors.

Propositional framing was used mostly by the leaders on the left, namely Pedro Sánchez and Yolanda Díaz. Both leaders adopted a discursive strategy based on proposals, and their objectives complemented each other in presenting their initiatives as solutions to citizens' problems, as shown in Figure 1. Regarding Pedro Sánchez, his propositional frames were intended to justify his governance as Prime Minister and reinforce his leadership. At the same time, he highlighted his role as the guarantor of the social democratic order, and he used data to defend his effective governmental management. This propositional attitude focused on social issues like employment, health care, education, and the welfare state. As for Yolanda Díaz, she also concurred with the socialist candidate in focusing her narratives on societal issues, which bolstered her image as a social leader. It also enhanced the perception of her empathy which, together with her feminine nature, tended to have a positive impact on the audience. Unlike the two currently governing leaders, Vox candidate Santiago Abascal makes less use of propositional framing in his narratives. With a key role in the opposition party, Abascal's discursive strategy did not focus on proposals, but rather on criticism. However, positive framing was also reflected when the right-wing leader defended the Spanish nation and advocated tax cuts.

These findings, together with the selection of the main issues, support the initial hypothesis that two candidates from the same political bloc give rise to coordinated discursive strategies that set the groundwork for a potential government coalition.

5.3. Conflict framing

In addition to propositional framing, another typology was also present in the debate, which is conflict framing. This allowed the authors to distinguish between the leaders' communication strategies.

Figure 2. Examples of the candidates' conflict frames.

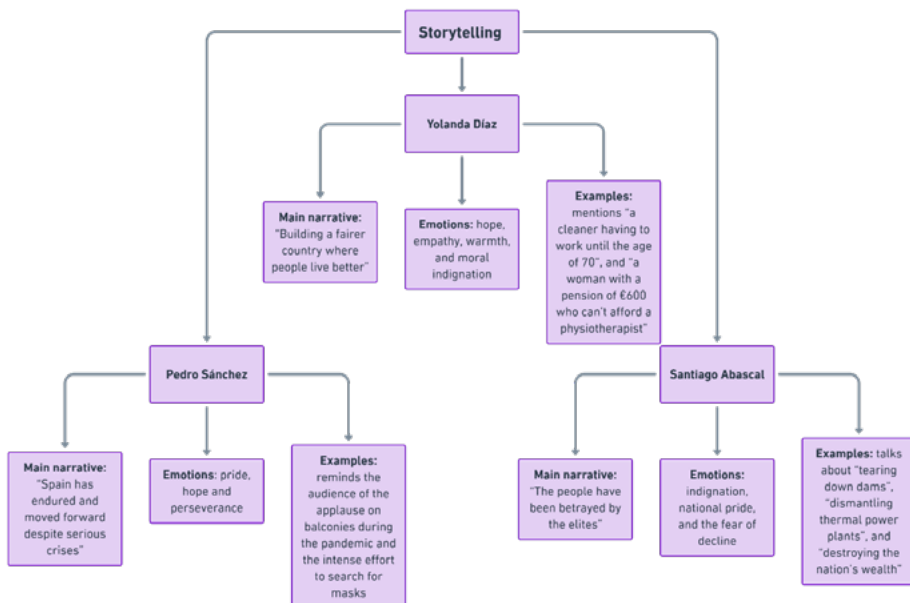


Source: created by the authors.

The conflict frames used in the three-way debate followed a very defined strategy: While the candidates on the left used them to discredit the right-wing, represented solely by Vox on this occasion, Abascal resorted to this approach to cast doubt on the left-wing and denigrate the governance carried out by the progressive coalition of the PSOE and Sumar. In this regard, Figure 2 illustrates how Pedro Sánchez criticises both the PP and Vox, portraying them as a unified bloc that shares the same ideology and political stance. Likewise, Yolanda Díaz used conflict frames when addressing issues of gender violence, equality between females and males, and bipartisanship. By contrast, Santiago Abascal relied on conflict frames to undermine the policies implemented by members of the "old political guard" and socialist politicians. During the debate, the objective of the Vox leader was to polarise, appeal to indignation, and fuel populism. Moreover, this type of discourse reinforces ideological antagonism and spreads an insurgent discourse, together with an appeal to cast protest votes.

5.4. Storytelling

Another discursive strategy is storytelling, which is a way of presenting proposals by appealing to stories and emotion. As shown in Figure 3, this is a narrative tool used for debates, yet it has certain nuances in these situations compared to its traditional use.

Figure 3. Discursive strategies used for storytelling.

Source: created by the authors.

In the case of Pedro Sánchez, storytelling focused on the reconstruction of the country after the Covid-19 pandemic and Spain's resilience in the face of various crises. In his opening speech, he referred to the applause coming from people's balconies during the pandemic, and the hard work of healthcare professionals. This type of storytelling reveals a collective tale of crisis, struggle, and triumph over adversity, which appealed to the sensitivity of the public. On several occasions he also referred to progress on issues such as climate change and providing equal opportunities for Spanish people, with the implication that these advances required a great sacrifice.

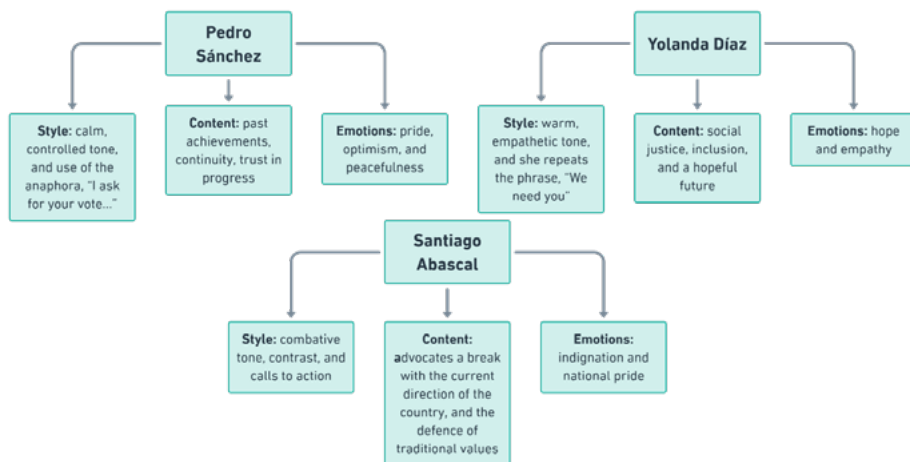
Yolanda Díaz used comparisons and scenes from everyday life to make her stories resonate with audiences. One example was her appeal to the rights of female cleaners as a case of injustice: "They want a cleaner to work until she's 70 years old, but I want her to have a better life, a green job, a decent wage, and a shorter work day". Díaz took the same approach in the social realm when she addressed the issue of primary health care and waiting lists. She also used dichotomy to discuss gender-based violence in order to differentiate herself from her main opponent.

As for Santiago Abascal, he also used storytelling, but from the viewpoint of conflict. He appealed to "betrayal by the elites", and to a clear dichotomy of "Sánchez and the

left" vs. "the people as victims", a strategy which allowed him to lure the emotions of indignation and identity. Abascal's use of images conveyed fear among the audience regarding the current elite, in an attempt to portray himself as a safe alternative.

5.5. The golden minute

Figure 4. Discursive strategies used in the golden minute



Source: created by the authors.

Both Pedro Sánchez and Yolanda Díaz appeal to positive emotions when asking for the vote in their golden minute. On the one hand, Pedro Sánchez uses the anaphora, "I ask for your vote", and dichotomies such as, "Women win and sexist men lose". Nevertheless, he makes these comments with his usual institutional formality, with the aim of reinforcing his confidence and leadership. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 4, Yolanda Díaz also uses rhetorical strategies such as the anaphora, "We need you", along with a focus on collective inclusion and affective language. The aim is to stir the audience and mobilise them by using emotional language. Finally, Santiago Abascal abandons cordiality and urges a break with socialist policies by using a combative discourse. Moreover, he once again appeals to polarising rhetoric such as the people vs. the elites, truth vs. lies, and others. He emphatically rejects the current policies and defends traditional values, appealing to indignation and mobilisation. With his golden minute, he tries to convey strength, identity, and the portrayal of public dissatisfaction.

5.6. Non-verbal language

The non-verbal language of the participants, including gestures, facial expressions, bodily posture and movements have also been analysed, thereby complementing and enhancing the verbal narratives and giving them greater meaning.

Figure 5. Non-verbal language of the candidates in the three-way debate.



Source: created by the authors

Given his experience in front of the camera, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has a neutral facial expression with occasional smiles at key moments, but with a frown when it comes to addressing controversial issues. He maintains eye contact, which expresses confidence and assertiveness, and he has considerable control over his gestures and use of hands when explaining his ideas. In general, his appearance conveys confidence and spatial control, with no signs of nervousness. Yolanda Díaz reflects moderation and control in her facial expressions. As shown in Figure 5, she displays a moderate level of gestures, and her body posture conveys calmness and approachability. Her experience in public speaking gives her a certain command of

the stage, with no signs of nervousness nor excessive hand movements. On the other hand, Santiago Abascal has a more intense facial expression, with a furrowed brow and a more serious look. His eyes are fixed on his opponents when there is confrontation, and he displays a defiant attitude. He also reinforces his non-verbal messages through energetic, repetitive gestures, and at times he even shows a clenched fist. Overall, the Vox candidate conveys a certain level of energy and aggression through his body language and movements, which set him apart from the other candidates in the three-way debate.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Consistent with the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2007), the results of this study confirm that candidates who are currently in the government place the priority on propositional strategies, while those of the opposing ideology resort to conflict to a greater extent. However, the debate analysed in this research introduces an important aspect by showing how, in an uneven, three-way context, this logic is reinforced by the creation of symbolic alliances between the candidates from the progressive bloc. Based on this finding, the original hypothesis is confirmed, given that there is a clear convergence in the discursive strategy of Pedro Sánchez and Yolanda Díaz within their ideological camp. Their narratives are expressed in the selection of topics and recommendations for possible agreements and government alliances. By directing their criticism solely at the right and far right, both candidates slowly move toward a more confrontational discourse, assuming a gradually more antagonistic tone.

To answer the research question about discursive structures in a three-way debate in the absence of a key competitor, the data suggest that the only leader positioned within the conservative bloc, Santiago Abascal, tends to articulate a divergent discursive strategy, with a notable reliance on framing the conflict and criticizing the progressive ideological bloc. To this end, the candidate employs delegitimizing strategies against the coalition government, attacking its legislative initiatives and strategically deploying discursive noise and rhetorical polarization to divide public opinion. In fact, Abascal's use of negative, confrontational framing is used to portray the political strategy of leaders in the opposing camp (Hänggli and Kriesi, 2012).

The empty-chair effect caused by Alberto Núñez Feijóo's absence may have led to a more discursively polarized debate, not only regarding contextual matters but also on topics specific to the electoral platforms. This coincides with the conclusions of Garrido (2010), who advocates the rational use of this strategy in order to avoid detrimental effects, not only to the candidates, but to the political environment as well.

Therefore, debates are considered brief yet powerful opportunities for candidates to enhance their image and win the hearts of voters (Ouahmane, 2025). Moreover, the dynamics of a horse race are evident in these situations, where the winners of a debate gain an advantage in persuading the electorate to cast their vote in their direction (García Hípola, 2021). Furthermore, all the foregoing highlights the key role that television has acquired in the field of marketing and political communication (Quintas Froufe and Quintas Froufe, 2010).

Regarding limitations, as this research used the case study method to address the three-way debate linked to the general elections of 23 June, the applicability of the results to other electoral contexts is limited. Although the use of a qualitative methodology based on content analysis has provided a deeper understanding of discursive strategies, it does not allow the authors to establish causal relationships, nor to measure the frequency and impact of the communication tools examined. On the other hand, this analysis could be strengthened by a mixed-methodology approach for the purpose of integrating the study of public opinion with voter intention. Furthermore, although the absence of Alberto Núñez Feijóo as the PP candidate prevents a direct comparison of the communication strategies used by the main parties along the entire ideological spectrum, it does allow an examination of discursive dynamics that have been scarcely explored in the literature on electoral debates in Spain. In future research, it would be useful to analyse the agenda-setting effect of election debates by assessing how the issues defended by politicians influence citizens' priorities. Moreover, it would also be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies in order to explore the evolution of discursive strategies in electoral debates over time, especially given the current context of increasing fragmentation of the political party system.

References

- Benoit, William L. (2007). *Communication in political campaigns*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Benoit, William L., Hansen, Glenn J. and Verser, Rebecca (2003). A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. Presidential Debates. In: *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 70, nº4, 335-350.
- Best, Samuel J. and Hubbard, Clark (1999). Maximizing Minimal Effects: The Impact of Early Primary Season Debates on Voter Preferences. In: *American Politics Quarterly*, Vol. 27, nº4, 450-467. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X99027004004>
- Castromil, Antón and Rodríguez, Raquel (2019). "Del "cara a cara" a los debates "a cuatro" en España". In: Conde-Vázquez, Eerica; FontenlaPedreira, Julia y Rúas-Araújo, José (Eds.). *Debates electorales televisados: delantes al después*. La Laguna (Tenerife): Cuadernos Artesanos de Comunicación, cac 154. DOI: 10.4185/cac154
- Crespo, Ismael (2023). Introducción. *III Encuesta Nacional de Polarización Política 2023*. Centro de Estudios Murciano de Opinión Pública (CEMOP):

- Crespo, Ismael, Garrido, Antonio, Riorda, Mario and Carletta, Ileana (2011). *Manual de Comunicación Política y estrategias de campaña. Candidatos, medios y electorales en una nueva era*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Corraze, Jacques (1986). *Las comunicaciones no verbales*. Madrid: G. Núñez Editor.
- De Fina, Anna (2023). Narratives and storytelling processes in the analysis of political discourse. In: Cap Piotr (Ed.). *Handbook of political discourse*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800373570.00022>
- De Vreese, Claes H., Jochen, Peter and Semetko, Holli A. (2001). Framing Politics at the Launch of the Euro: A Cross-National Comparative Study of Frames in the News. In: *Political Communication*, Vol. 18, nº2, 107-122. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/105846001750322934>
- Díaz Herrera Claudio (2018). Investigación cualitativa y análisis de contenido temático. Orientación intelectual de revista Universum. In: *Revista General de Información y Documentación*, Vol. 28, nº 1, 119-142. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5209/RGID.60813>
- Entman, Robert M. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. In: *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43, nº 4, 51 – 58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Gallardo-Páuls, Beatriz (2021). Convencer mirando a cámara: el minuto de oro de los debates electorales como refugio de condensación retórica. In: *Rilce: Revista de Filología Hispánica*, Vol. 37, nº 2, 90 – 620. DOI: 10.15581/008.37.2.590-620
- García Hipolla, Giselle (2021). Estrategias de comunicación en los debates electorales: una aproximación a los efectos de los debates en Andalucía 2008 y 2012. In: *RIPS: Revista De Investigaciones Políticas Y Sociológicas*. Vol. 20, nº2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15304/rips.20.2.7953>
- Garrido, Antonio (2010). Luz, cámara: ¡Debate! In: *Más Poder Local*, nº1, 34-37.
- Garrido, Antonio and Sierra, Javier (2013). El debate electoral entre Rajoy y Rubalcaba: estrategias de comunicación política y efectos sobre la decisión de voto. In: *Partidos, medios y electores en procesos de cambio. Las elecciones generales españolas de 2011*, (Dir.) Ismael Crespo Martínez (2013), Valencia: Tirant Humanidades.
- Hänggeli, Regula and Kriesi, Hanspeter (2012). Frame Construction and Frame Promotion (Strategic Framing Choices). In: *SAGE*, Vol. 56, nº3, 260-278. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211426325>
- Herrero, Julio C. and Benoit, William (2009). Análisis funcional de los debates en las elecciones generales de 2008. In: *Zer*, Vol. 14, nº27, 61-81. <http://hdl.handle.net/10810/41003>
- Iyengar, Shanto (1991). *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lagares Diez, Nieves, Jaráiz Gullías, Erika and Castro Martínez, Paloma (2020). La percepción de los debates como factor de decisión en el comportamiento electoral en las Elecciones Generales de abril de 2019. In: *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, nº 76, 39-58. DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2020-1436>
- Lobillo Mora, Gema and Hernández Cruz, Miranda (2025). ¿Cómo comunican los candidatos de las elecciones generales del 23J en España? Análisis de la comunicación no verbal y análisis del discurso de Sánchez y Feijóo. In: *Anuario Electrónico de Estudios en Comunica-*

- ción Social "Disertaciones", Vol. 18, nº2, 1-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/disertaciones/a.14898>
- McCombs, Maxwell (2006). *Estableciendo la agenda. El impacto de los medios en la opinión pública y en el conocimiento*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- McCombs, Maxwell and Ghanem, Salma (2001). The convergence of agenda setting and framing. In: Reese Stephen, Gandy Óscar and Grant August (Eds). *Framing Public Life: A bridging model for media research*. Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Moreno, Cristina (2010). El efecto de la campaña para las elecciones generales españolas de 2008 sobre la información política y la participación electoral de los votantes: ¿se puede hablar de una función de legitimación de las campañas electorales? In: *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, nº24, 53-82.
- Morris, Dick (1999). *The New Prince: Machiavelli Updated for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Renaissance Books, U.S..
- Muñiz, Carlos, Saldierna, Alma and Marañón, Felipe (2018). Framing of electoral processes: The stages of the campaign as a moderator of the presence of political frames in the news. In: *Palabra Clave*, Vol. 21, Nº 3, 740-771.
- Neuman, Russell Just, Marion and Crigler, Ann (1992). *Common Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Quahmane, Abderrahim (2025). El "minuto de oro" en el debate electoral Sánchez-Feijóo (23J): análisis pragmático-discursivo. In: *Journal of Languages and Translation*, Vol. 12, Nº 2, 21-38. DOI: 10.21608/jltmin.2025.452160
- Prensa RTVE. (2023). El debate final lidera el día con 4,1 millones de espectadores y 34,6% de cuota en RTVE. Rteve. Recuperado el 13/12/ 2025 de <https://www.rtve.es/rtve/20230720/debate-final-lidera-dia-con-41-millones-espectadores-346-cuota-rtve/2452446.shtml>
- Quintas Froufe, Natalia and Quintas Froufe, Eva (2010). Cara a cara electoral televisado: análisis audiovisual de los debates presidenciales. In: *Miguel Hernández Communication Journal*, Nº 2, 20-39.
- Reina, Augusto and Cruz, Facundo (2025). Debates presidenciales: entre el ritual democrático y el simulacro político. In: *Comunicación y Hombre*, Vol. 21, 65-78. DOI: 10.32466/eu-fv-cyh.2025.21.861.65-78
- Riba Campos, Carles E. (2010). El análisis de contenido en perspectiva cualitativa. In: Riba Campos Carles E. (Eds). *Técnicas de análisis de datos cualitativos*. Recurs d'aprenentatge de la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.
- Sarasqueta, Gonzalo, Ferrero, Martina, Olmedo, Samantha, Rojas Montiel, Erick R., Castillo Peñaherrera, Cristian, Martínez Rodríguez, Rodrigo, Maíz de Sotomayor, Nilsa, Salinas Goytia, Juan R. and Ames Tineo de Saavedra, Ana C. (2025). La construcción de narrativas políticas en campañas electorales sudamericanas: un análisis de las redes sociales. In: *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, Vol. 83, 1-22. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2025-2442>
- Seargenat, Philip (2022). *The art of political storytelling why stories win votes in post-truth politics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Semetko, Holly and Valkenburg, Patti (2000). Framing European politics: a content analysis of press and television news. In: *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 50, N° 2, 93-109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02843.x>
- Watzlawick, Paul, Beavin, Janet and Jackson, Don (1971). Teoría de la comunicación. In: *Tiempo Contemporáneo*, Vol. 16, 257.