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## Building the news media agenda: Spanish political parties' influence on traditional media and blogosphere agendas during 2011 electoral campaign

### Abstract

**This article aims to analyse the composition of partisan agendas during the Spanish General Election campaign 2011 and their sponsorship by different media actors (both traditional and digital), through a methodological approach that consists of content analysis applied to a corpus of 168 news pieces. Our goal is to empirically assess if the polarized pluralism of the Spanish media system leads traditional media outlets to adopt and disseminate the issue priorities emphasized by the political parties that belong to their respective ideological spheres. Moreover, this study examines if the Spanish political blogosphere is influenced by partisan agendas during the electoral campaign. The results show that while traditional newspapers clearly sponsor partisan agendas in their editorials, political blogs tend to promote a significantly more independent and open thematic debate.**

### Keywords

**agenda setting, agenda building, polarized pluralism, electoral campaign 2011**

## 1. Theoretical framework

### 1.1. Agenda setting: reach and limitations

The news media have an immense ability to establish the topics of public debate, as corroborated by the agenda setting research model, which has provided ample empirical evidence of the media's ability to transfer issue importance to the public on a set of issues in various socio-political contexts (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Winter & Eyal, 1981; Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990; Canel & al., 1996).

The significance of research carried out under agenda setting stems from its status as a middle-range theory (Merton, 1957), that is, its ability to formulate empirically testable hypotheses and confirm or refute them through systematic methods which limit subjective biases in the interpretation of texts. Still more, agenda setting has played a decisive role in shifting Mass Communication Research's foundational obsession with the study of short-term attitudinal effects towards a

broader approach, which analyses the effects of the media from a cognitive perspective and explores their social consequences (Carragee & al., 1987; Lowery & DeFleur, 1988).

Furthermore, this perspective is characterised by a notable methodological refinement (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Kosicki, 1993; McCombs, 2004), in such a way that, in addition to the initial measurements of aggregate public opinion data that characterized the Chapel Hill study, methodology now includes the analysis of individual data and panel studies of groups of voters (Schoenbach, 1982; Becker, 1982; McLeod & al., 1974).

Thanks to its explanatory potential and its refined methodological approach, agenda setting has established itself as a research model in the field of communications, and its initial objectives have diversified (Ghanem, 1997), including new questions which in many cases go beyond the model's original reach (Kosicki, 1993). Such is the case, for example, with the second level of agenda, which focuses attention on the attributes of those issues which the media emphasize and how they are transferred to citizens (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). "Whereas the 'first level' of *agenda setting* is focused on the relative salience (usually operationally defined as perceived importance) of issues or subjects, the 'second level' examines the relative salience of attributes of issues" (Weaver, 2007: 142).

This shift to the second level of agenda means, in fact, going beyond the model's essential core: the idea that the foundation of the media's power is not persuasive but rather cognitive, and that it resides in the selection of a series of issues that delineate the contours of public debate in the minds of the citizenry (Kosicki, 1993). The transfer of importance of issue attributes, a fruitful research field (Benton & Frazier, 1976; Becker & McCombs, 1978; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & al, 2000), paradoxically demonstrates that the media not only tell people what to think about, but also how to think about it<sup>1</sup>.

Despite its versatility and its successive reformulations, agenda setting has also shown a notorious limitation, since its development has essentially been circumscribed to the formulation of rather modest theoretical assessments derived from correlations between issues (or attributes) highlighted by the media and public concerns. As a result, many authors stress the marked theoretical and interpretative restraint of this perspective, in addition to the need to articulate a more profound theory on the process of public opinion formation and the many social actors involved in building the news media agenda (Lang and Lang, 1981; Gandy, 1982; Swanson, 1988; Weiss, 1992; Kosicki, 1993; Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

Many researchers have insisted on studying where media content comes from, in order to broaden the study of media effects by placing findings within their social and political context. "I suggest that we go beyond *agenda setting* to determine who sets the media agenda, how and for what purposes it is set, and with what impact on the distribution of power and values in society" (Gandy, 1982: 266). In fact, one of the greatest limitations of the agenda setting model revolves around the fact that it takes media content as an independent variable, avoiding any examination of the ideological and power disputes that occur in the public sphere, which ultimately give rise to the media content itself (Lang and Lang, 1981; Gandy, 1982; Kosicki, 1993; Carragee & Roefs, 2004). "The whole question of how issues originate is sidestepped, nor is there any recognition of the process through which agendas are built or through which an object that has caught public attention, by being big news, gives rise to a political issue" (Lang & Lang, 1981: 278).

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<sup>1</sup>The theory of framing has a proven track record revolving around those questions originally overlooked by agenda setting, dating back to the pioneering works of Bateson (1955) and Goffman (1974). Currently, the approaches greatly complement each other in communications research.

### **1. 2. *Agenda building: the public sphere as a battlefield***

The importance of studying the interaction between distinct social actors, in their eagerness to access the media and shape the media agenda, is considerably reinforced by the fact that it would be reductionist to assume that the media reflect objective reality (Hackett, 1984) and, therefore, build their agenda independently and free from any social or political influence. This idea implies an exaggeration of journalistic autonomy (Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

This concern regarding how different actors try to influence the news media agenda has been partially incorporated by the model through so-called agenda building studies (Lang & Lang, 1981; Gandy, 1982; McLeod & al., 1991; Kosicki, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Takeshita, 1997; Pan & Kosicki, 2001; McCombs, 2004), which aim to examine the extramedia factors that influence the media agenda. From this standpoint, the public sphere is viewed as a space for competition among different agendas, in such a way that each social actor tries to maximize his presence and convince the media to assume his proposal and objectives, which would then lead to the support of other public actors. "I believe that the best way to understand the role of the news media is to view it as a part of a larger contest among political antagonists for the control of the public agenda" (Hänggli, 2011: 301).

Thus, the news media agenda is the result of a complex dynamic in which many actors with unequal power relationships try to impose their issue priorities and regularly feed the media with content and meaning in order to access the citizen public (Ryan, 1991; Sádaba, 2001; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Sádaba & Rodríguez Virgili, 2007; Hänggli, 2011). "Given the crucial role of the news media for reaching out to the citizen public, the struggle for attention and for the meaning of political issues becomes a struggle for the control of the news agenda" (Hänggli, 2011: 301).

Nonetheless, we must not forget that this agenda building approach does not emerge exclusively as an evolution of the agenda setting model, given that there were already similar studies in the field of political science (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Elder & Cobb, 1984) and others coming from the communication field as well (Lang & Lang, 1983). Developing alongside the agenda setting research model there was also a school of constructivist sociology, focused on the analysis of discursive and symbolic interaction among social movements and media actors (Snow & al., 1986; Gamson, 1988; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Ryan, 1992; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Benford & Snow, 2000).

Of course, the ability of different social actors to garner media attention and transfer their respective agendas is significantly unequal. Access to media is an unequally distributed good: whereas political elites generally obtain access almost automatically, social movements face many obstacles (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Entman, 1989; Ryan, 1992; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 2001). Consequently, those social groups with established leaders and formal organizations, that is, those with higher levels of institutionalisation, achieve much greater access to the media (Hall & al, 1978; Entman, 1989; Ryan, 1991; Kosicki, 1993).

### **1.3. *Interaction between political and media actors in the context of polarized pluralism and digital communication***

Who dominates the interaction between political actors and the news media in the building of the media content? Some scholars define this interaction as a "competitive symbiosis" (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 13), through which both actors attempt to take equal advantage of each other. Others add that it is a clearly asymmetrical relationship and compare it to a dance that tends to be led by the political actors, as they are the ones who provide the media with the issues (Gans, 1979). In any case, the social actors' power, economic and symbolic resources are decisive factors when it comes to garnering media attention (Gans, 1979;

Gitlin, 1980; Wolfsfeld, 1997). On top of that, relying on the political elites is the most economical way for the media to gather information (Entman, 1989; Dickerson, 2001).

Either way, the interaction between political and media actors should be studied through the three relationship models established by Hallin and Mancini (2004), in order to analyse this interaction within its historicity. These authors include Spain in the polarized pluralism model, in which the press has historically waged ideological battles and media groups have tended to support certain political parties (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 86). The Spanish model, therefore, shows a high level of political parallelism<sup>2</sup>, that is, a high degree of correspondence between the structure of the media and the political system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 25).

That political parallelism is reflected in the recent study by Humanes et al. (2013), which investigates the opinions on political journalism held by the actual heads of the political sections of different Spanish newspapers. "Political journalism is clearly high politicized and is based on ideological alignments" (Humanes & al., 2013: 727). Their conclusions reflect the fact that the negotiation of newsworthiness between political and media actors is clearly dominated by the former, in such a way that the media assume explicit ideological alignments with the parties.

Furthermore, this media system of polarised pluralism has been recently affected by the emergence of the Internet and an endless array of digital media that lack such historical relationships with Spanish political actors, but sometimes seem to compete with the traditional media in their willingness to align themselves with the parties (López & al., 2011; Valera, 2012; López & al., 2013), despite the hope that different scholars have placed in digital technologies to democratize the public sphere (Rheingold, 2004; Jenkins, 2006).

Therefore, in order to determine if the ideological fragmentation of Spain's public realm associated with the polarised pluralism media system has led traditional and digital media to completely adopt the partisan agendas, it would be wise to investigate the parties' ability to shape different media agendas during the 2011 electoral campaign.

## **2. Research hypothesis**

The current study aims to empirically test the following hypotheses:

H1. The polarized pluralism of the Spanish media system leads to a generalized adoption of the partisan issue agendas by traditional media outlets, in such a way that newspapers generously reproduce and disseminate the parties' priority issues throughout the electoral campaign.

H2. The structure of the traditional Spanish public sphere in ideological spheres is reproduced in the digital media environment, which means that the political blogosphere also tends to generously adopt partisan issue agendas.

## **3. Methods**

The method used in this study is content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990), a technique that allows us to analyse messages in a systematic, objective and quantitative way (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996) by isolating them from the rest of the communicative process. Content analysis offers descriptive and categorizable information that serves to attribute relative

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<sup>2</sup> The indicators of this concept are the following: a) the degree to which political orientations are reflected in the content of media products; b) the organizational relationships between the media and political parties; c) the political affiliations of the journalists who make up the media staff; and d) the journalistic practices themselves (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 25-26).

salience to the different issues that appear in public discourse (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Benton & Frazier, 1976; McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

Accordingly, the texts are analysed in terms of 57 issues that make up the overall set of relevant topics likely to be addressed in the campaign. This list of issues includes specific areas of public policy, as well as questions related to the strategic and symbolic aspects of the campaign (see appendix). The codification has been carried out entirely by the author. Nonetheless, this content analysis proposal was originally conceived by Guillermo López for the study of various agendas during the 2008 electoral campaign and later adapted for the study of the 2011 campaign. Furthermore, it has undergone various pretests in several studies (Valera & al., 2013; López & al., 2013; Valera & López, 2014) associated with different R&D projects. In every study, the level of agreement between codifiers was greater than 80%.

While codifying the corpus, a minimum of one and a maximum of three issues per news release were registered for parties and blogs, whereas for newspapers, the minimum was one and the maximum was only two topics, due to the brevity of the editorials. The issues were not ranked in terms of importance, but they were registered taking into account their order of appearance in the texts.

#### **4. Sample and time frame**

First, the sample of the parties' discourse was obtained via the websites of the two major Spanish political parties: the People's Party ([www.pp.es](http://www.pp.es)) and the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party ([www.psoe.es](http://www.psoe.es)). This choice is in keeping with three fundamental criteria: 1) political actors' strategic incorporation of the Internet as an ordinary dimension of their campaigns, especially designed to garner media attention (Davis, 1999; Dader, 2009; Schweitzer, 2008); 2) the configuration of these online enclaves as spaces oriented towards the dissemination of information and the promotion of political persuasion (Owen & Davis, 2008; Druckman & al., 2009; Dader & al., 2011; Schweitzer, 2011); and 3) the absolute communicative control that the parties exert over their respective websites. All these well-established circumstances allow us to assume as a theoretical premise that the political parties use their websites to introduce and publicise their issue agendas.

More concretely, the corpus is made up of news releases that the parties published every day on their websites throughout the campaign. There are three justifications for selecting these news releases instead of other content on the parties' websites (such as electoral programs or other information). First of all, the front-and-centre position of these news releases on the parties' websites rendered them the most visible and emphasized content of the websites. Second, they provided easy access to the readers; who could access the entire article with just one click, whereas accessing other web content involved a much more complicated process. Third, the content was constantly updated. Every day new articles that precisely developed the partisan agendas were published. In this way, between one and three news releases were collected daily, which yielded a total sample size of 96: 46 news releases published by the PSOE and 50 by the PP.

Moreover, the media discourse sample was extracted from the traditional written press for two reasons: 1) research has shown that this type of media has a greater ability to establish the public agenda when compared to other media (Tipton et al., 1975; McClure and Patterson, 1976); and 2) the press clearly plays the role of opinion leader in Spain's public sphere. We have chosen two newspapers which we esteem to be a representative and ideologically balanced sample of the Spanish generalist press: *El País* and *El Mundo*. These

two papers have the highest readership among general information papers from 1995 to 2011 (Estudio General de Medios, 2012)<sup>3</sup>.

The sample is made up of the editorials published by each paper during the campaign. We assume that editorials are the informational product that best and most emphatically represents the newspapers' priority issues, the papers being conceived of as social agents that also have a certain desire to influence reality. The sample is limited to those editorials that have something to do with the electoral process. That is, we submitted them to a previously established variable that determined if the content had to do with the electoral campaign in a broad sense. This variable was conceived to be flexible, in such a way that any editorial that dealt with the electoral process specifically or Spanish politics in general was accepted. Thus, the sample consists of a total of 36 editorials: 10 from *El País* and 26 from *El Mundo*.

Regarding the political blogosphere, two types of blogs were selected: blogs belonging to well-known journalists (journalist blogs) and blogs belonging to members of the general public (anonymous citizen blogs). Selecting two types of blogs allows us to detect possible differences between the discourse of prominent social actors, as in the journalists' case, and that of peripheral actors, that is, citizens who lack visibility in the main public sphere. Therefore, the sample includes *Escolar.net* and *El blog de Federico* as journalist blogs, and *Desde el Exilio* and *Materias grises* (currently housed under *Politikon*<sup>4</sup>) as citizen blogs. The criteria behind the sample selection aim to ensure that we are dealing with blogs that are as salient as possible, notwithstanding the difficulties present in estimating Internet audiences. Consequently, the criteria vary depending on the nature of the blogs.

1. *Popularity*. For journalists, the authors' reputation tends to grant them greater online salience, as is the case for both Losantos and Escolar.

2. *Seniority*. Anonymous citizens lack the public salience necessary to earn them popularity online, which requires them to have been around for quite some time, in addition to publishing content frequently enough to achieve a certain level of visibility. Seniority and continuity thus become important criteria when it comes to the citizen blogs. *Desde el Exilio* was created in January of 2005 and *Materias Grises* in 2004. Both have an extensive track record, which gives them a moderately salient position within the Spanish blogosphere.

3. *Ideological balance*. Lastly, ideological balance has also guided the sample selection. Consequently, two of the blogs (*El Blog de Federico* and *Desde el exilio*) have a liberal-conservative bias, whereas the other two blogs (*Escolar.net* and *Materias grises*) show a certain progressive streak. For journalist blogs, we take the journalists' association with ideologically defined journalistic projects (*Libertad Digital* and *Público*) as indicators of this bias, whereas when dealing with citizen blogs, we do so in light of *Desde el Exilio's* association with the Liberal Blogosphere Network (*Red Liberal*) and Senserrich's activism in the PSOE. Nonetheless, these ideological assumptions are tentative and need to be confirmed by the analysis.

The selected time frame corresponds with the official electoral campaign for the November 2011 General Elections, but it also includes the Election Day and the following day

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<sup>3</sup> This data comes from the 2012 Estudio General de Medios (featuring 2011 data), an annual study published by the AIC (*Asociación para la Investigación de los Medios de Comunicación*) that gathers audience ratings for various types of media. Available at: <http://www.aimc.es/-Descarga-Marco-General-Asociados-.html>

<sup>4</sup> The original corpus design included *Materias grises*, a blog on politics and economy created by Roger Senserrich in the year 2005, which in 2011 ceased being an independent blog and was absorbed by a platform called *Politikon*. Nonetheless, the platform's administration allows for independent author control of each blog ([www.politikon.es/materiasgrises](http://www.politikon.es/materiasgrises)). Later on, *Politikon* would undergo a restructuring that would do away with the independent domains and bring all the content under the same URL: [www.politikon.es](http://www.politikon.es). The sample includes all of the "Materias grises" posts published by Roger Senserrich throughout the time frame, though currently the posts are found under the integrated *Politikon* platform.

(4-21 November). We hold that the selection of this time frame is justified because campaigns are a particularly useful process for studying the interaction among political and media actors within the context of a media system characterized by polarised pluralism. Electoral periods force political actors to mobilize their respective spheres of influence and to reach the greatest number of potential voters. Now more than ever, political parties must resort to the media to transmit their issue agendas to the electorate. Thus, we have tied the study to this specific period in order to observe any possible alignment between political and media actors.

For the political blogosphere, however, the time frame is extended to the 22<sup>nd</sup> November. This is because the blogosphere publishes at a much more flexible and uneven rate than the traditional media, and blogs are not necessarily updated daily.

**Table 1.** Composition of the sample

<b>Analysis objective</b>	<b>Source of the sample</b>	<b>Sample</b>
Partisan discourse	www.psoe.es (46) www.pp.es (50)	96 news releases
Media discourse	<i>El Mundo</i> (26) <i>El País</i> (10)	36 editorials
Political blogosphere discourse	Escolar.net (19) El blog de Federico (2) Materias grises (9) Desde el exilio (6)	36 articles
<b>Total</b>		<b>168 units of analysis</b>

## 5. Results

In the following section, the results for the agendas of political parties, the traditional media and political blogs will be laid out. To simplify the results' interpretation and comparison among different agendas, the issues are grouped into four broad categories: campaign-related issues (in blue), the economy (in green), social issues (in purple) and all other issues (in orange).

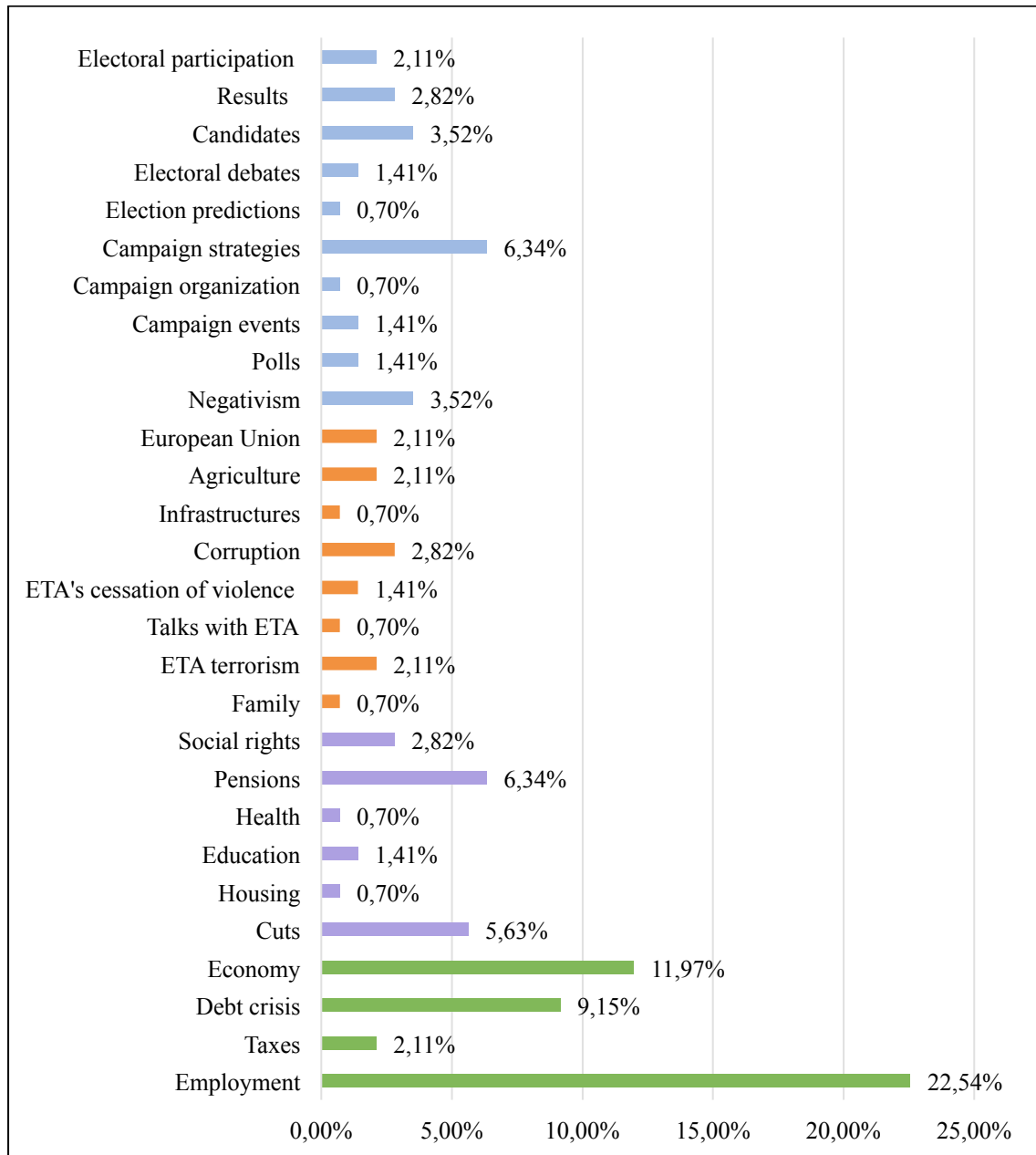
### 5.1. *The partisan agendas*

The results clearly reflect that the PP's agenda revolves around economic issues, among which employment is undoubtedly the most salient (Figure 1). Whereas no other issue features in more than 12% of the news releases published on the PP's website, this issue is present in 22.54% of them, making it by far the most frequent.

Furthermore, the second and third most common issues on the PP's website deal with the economy. On one hand, various issues included under the label "economy" (such as labour reform, economic assistance for entrepreneurs, bonuses for hiring workers), appear in 11.97% of the analysed news. On the other, 9.15% of the corpus deals with the debt crisis, a highly relevant issue due to the sustained increase in Spain's risk premium during the campaign. Lastly, fiscal policy is addressed in 2.12% of the articles. Together, strictly economic issues represent 45.77% of the PP's news releases, a clear indicator of their undeniable salience in the party's campaign strategy.

In addition to economic issues, however, there are others that obtain a certain level of salience, such as public spending cuts (5.63%), pensions (6.34%) or campaign strategies (6.34%), but these pale in comparison to the relevance of economic issues.

**Figure 1.** The PP agenda (N=50)



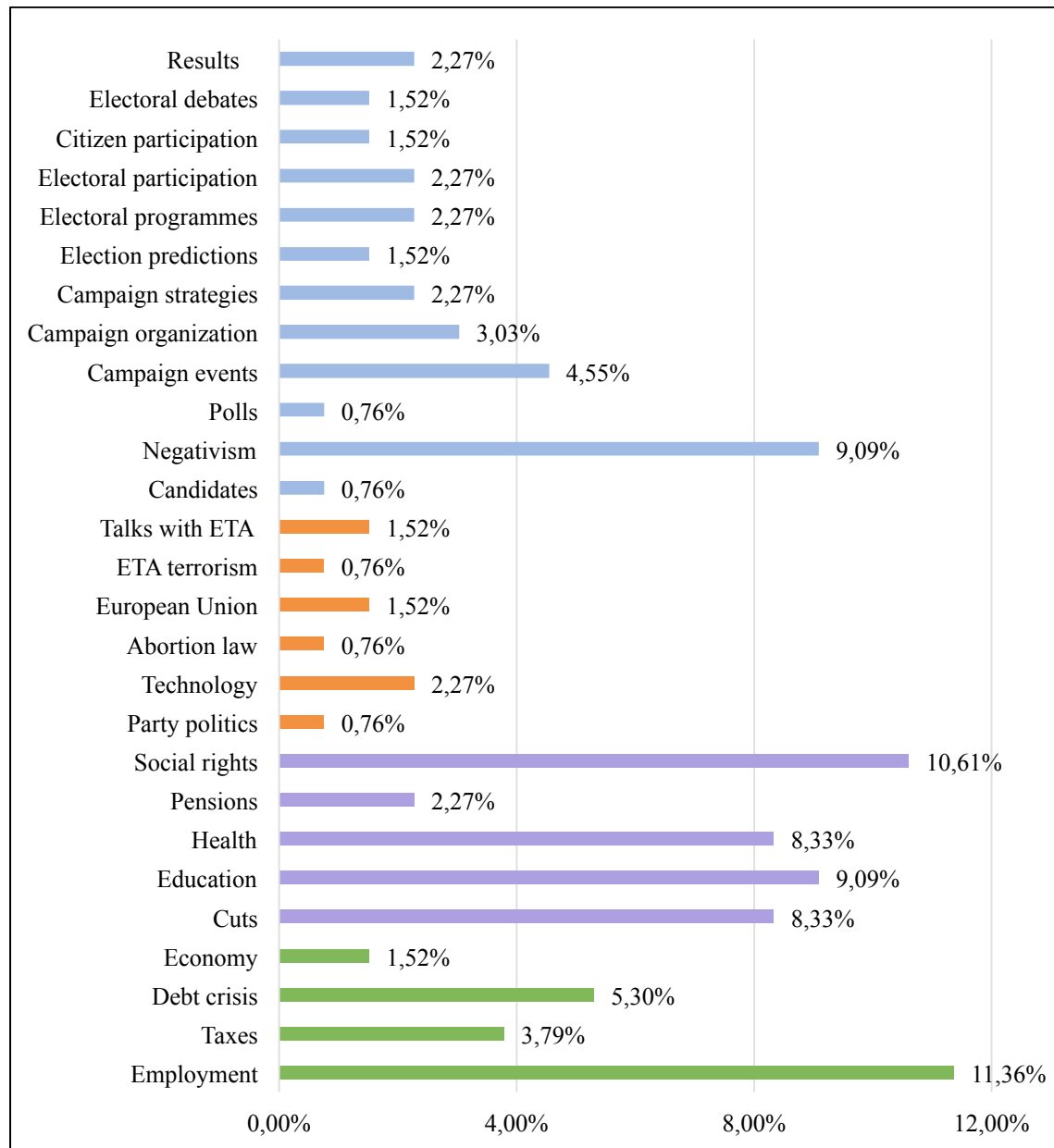
Regarding the socialists, the results show a more heterogeneous and balanced agenda, given that many issues share the limelight and no single one represents more than 12% of the sample (Figure 2). Consequently, employment, social rights, education, healthcare, public spending cuts and negativism show a similar frequency in the PSOE's publications, oscillating between 8% and 11%, which reveals the clear social bias of the socialist agenda.

The most frequently appearing issue for the PSOE is employment, but in this case it only appears in 11.36% of the news releases, that is, only half as often as it does in the PP's articles (22.54%). Other economic issues also arise in the socialists' news (taxes, debt crisis and other topics), as should be expected given the context of the campaign. Overall, economic issues are found in 21.97% of the corpus, that is, nearly one out of four information



pieces. This proportion is dwarfed by that of the PP agenda, in which nearly one out of two news releases deals with economic issues (45.77%).

**Figure 2.** The PSOE agenda (N=46)



Overall, the socialist agenda is clearly centred on social issues, that is, on the maintenance of the public services that make up the Spanish Welfare State, such as public education and public healthcare, the public pension system or social cuts, etc. Accordingly, social rights are present in 10.61% of the analysed sample. Education and healthcare, in turn, represent 9.09% and 8.33% of the socialist news. Moreover, concern about cuts to social programs represents 8.33% of the socialist campaign information. Lastly, pensions are addressed in 2.27% of the sample. Consequently, if we include all of these issues in a single category (cuts, social rights and gender equality, healthcare, education and pensions), the result is that social issues are present in 38.64% of the sample. In other words, nearly two

out of five socialist news articles focus on issues related to the Welfare State, whereas these same issues make up only 14.79% of the conservative agenda.

Ultimately, the results show that the agendas of the two major political parties in Spain express significantly different issue priorities, going beyond the issues related to progression of the campaign itself (and its symbolic and strategic aspects), which both the PSOE and the PP deal with abundantly on their respective websites. Thus, if we limit ourselves to the policy issues, it becomes clear that the PP's agenda is based on economic issues (employment, the debt crisis, taxes, etc.), whereas the PSOE emphasizes issues related to the Welfare State and social policies (education, healthcare, spending cuts, social rights), thereby softening the markedly economic tone of the campaign.

## 5.2. *The agendas of the traditional press*

When it comes to the traditional press, *El Mundo* pays copious amounts of attention in its editorials to the strategic aspects of the campaign. The paper dedicates 11.76% of its opinion pieces to electoral strategies, 5.88% to attacking the political rival and 3.92% to polls, election predictions and the candidates themselves (Figure 3).

Nonetheless, in terms of public policies, this paper's agenda is also clearly dominated by economic issues, given that one of the issues it most frequently addresses is the debt crisis that was plaguing the Eurozone. To illustrate, 15.69% of the editorials address this issue, whereas 7.84% deal with employment and 3.94% deal with other economic issues. Altogether, 27.47% of the analysed news is entirely dedicated to economic issues.

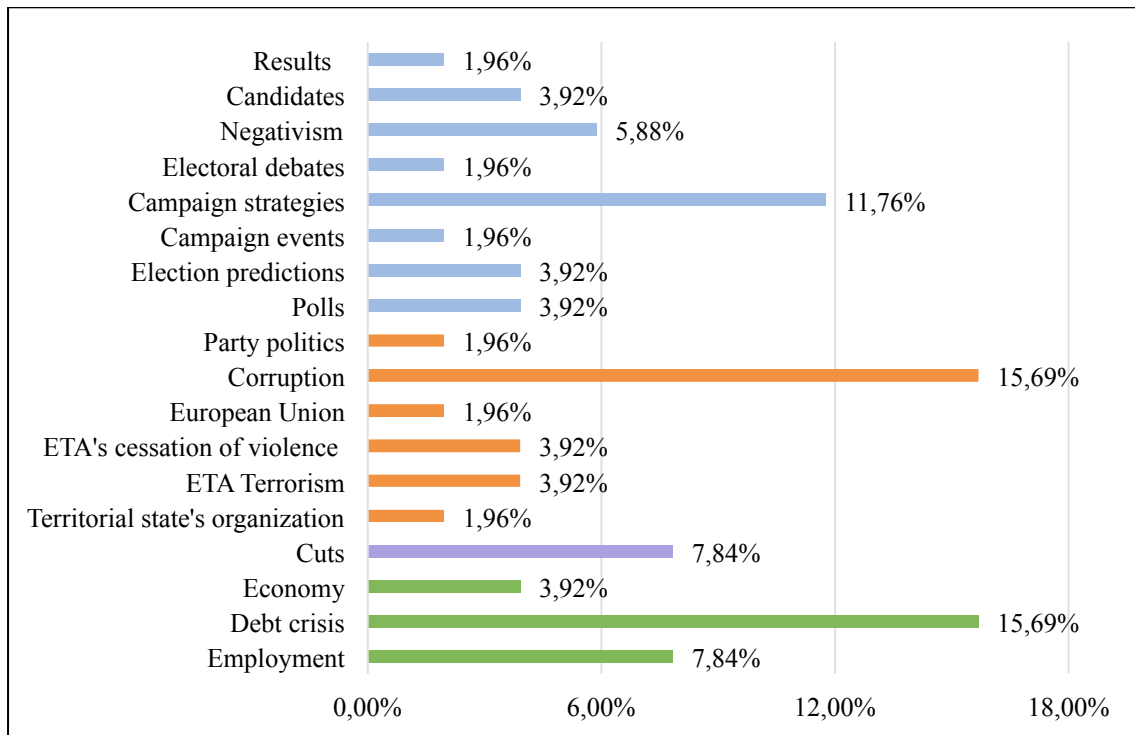
But *El Mundo's* editorial agenda incorporates other issues, as well. Specifically, it highlights the significance of corruption (15.69%), a minor issue in the conservatives' agenda (2.82%) that receives no coverage whatsoever in the socialists case. *El Mundo's* editorials on corruption revolve around the *Caso Campeón*, a presumed influence trafficking and bribery scandal in which the then-current Minister of Development, José Blanco, was implicated. In fact, *El Mundo* broke the story and returned to it repeatedly, especially during the first week of the campaign, publishing all sorts of information regarding the legal proceedings of the case.

Furthermore, this newspaper deals with ETA's October 2011 announcement of its definitive cessation of violence (3.92%), and the issue of terrorism in general, in 3.92% of its editorials. Spending cuts, meanwhile, are discussed in 7.84% of the editorials, but these pieces focus mainly on Spain's difficulty in issuing public debt and the need to implement structural adjustments in order to meet its deficit reduction targets set at the European level.

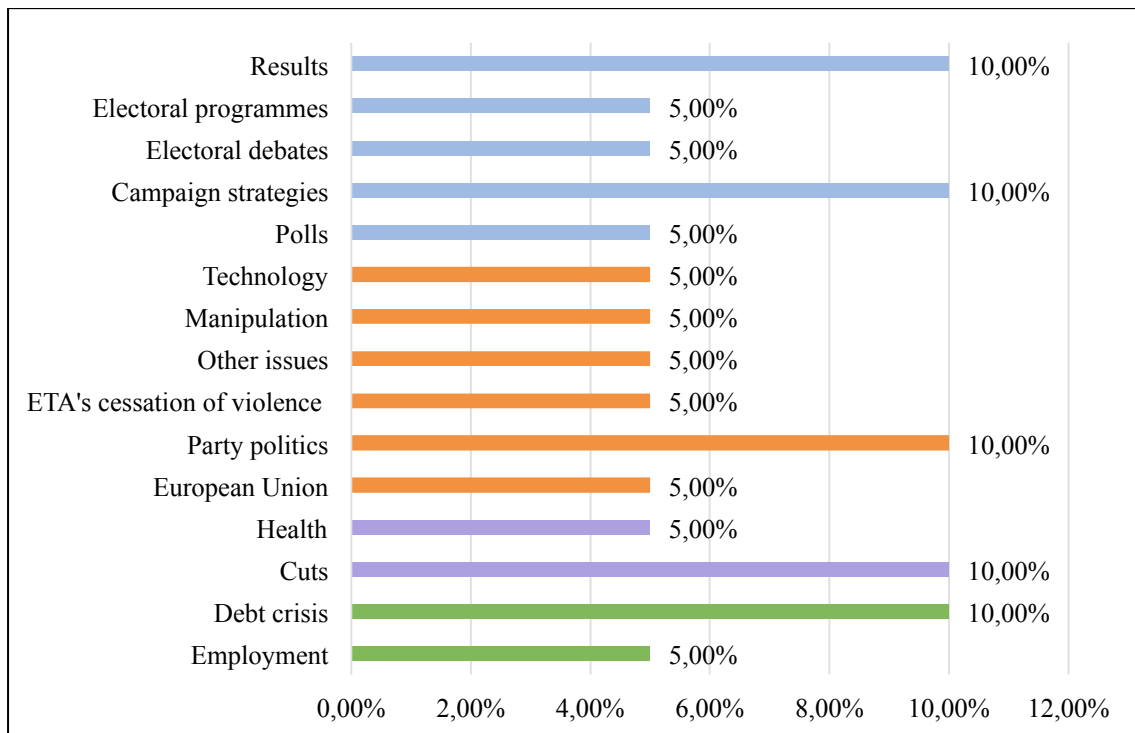
Thus, the results show marked thematic similarities between this paper's agenda and that of the PP's, reflected in the dominance of economic issues in the opinion pieces. This is reaffirmed by the gap between the socialist agenda and that of *El Mundo*, inasmuch as the paper lends little importance to social issues (education, healthcare, social rights, etc.). In this way, the similarity between *El Mundo's* priority issues and the PP's agenda suggests that the paper strongly echoes the conservative agenda during the electoral process.

*El País*, also editorialises on the strategic and symbolic aspects of the campaign, though to a slightly lesser extent than *El Mundo* (Figure 4). Ten percent of the editorials deal with campaign strategies, and the same amount of pieces revolve around predicting results, whereas only a 5% addresses electoral debates and programmes.

**Figure 4.** The editorial agenda of *El Mundo* (N=10)



**Figure 5.** The editorial agenda of *El País* (N=10)



In terms of policy realms, economic issues (the debt crisis and employment) are addressed in 15% of the editorials. Social issues (in this case, social spending cuts and healthcare), in turn, are equally as salient as economic issues. This suggests that the agendas

of *El País* and the PSOE are aligned, given that both combine the pervasiveness of economic issues during the 2011 electoral campaign with apprehension regarding the survival of the Welfare State and social spending cuts.

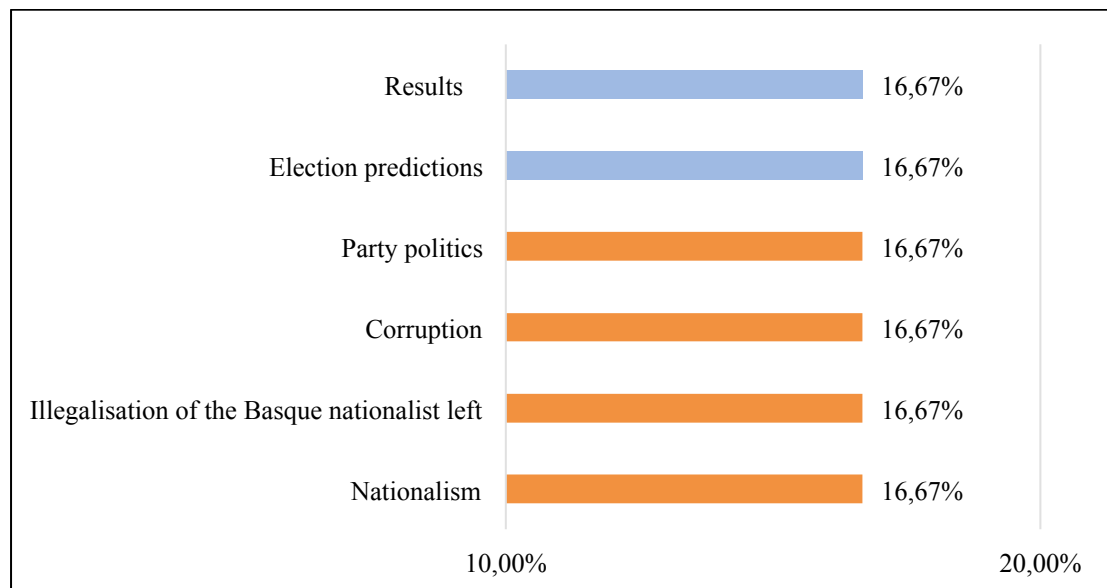
In conclusion, our analysis of the editorial agendas has revealed that there are strong issue similarities between partisan and media agendas. On one hand, *El Mundo* reproduces the primarily economic agenda of the conservatives and fails to make any mention of welfare policies, which are prioritized by the socialists. On the other hand, *El País* reflects the ubiquity of economic issues during the campaign (though less so than *El Mundo*), but it dedicates an equal amount of attention to social issues, thereby revealing its adoption of the socialists' issue priorities and supporting their public defence of the Welfare State. Consequently, we can affirm that processes of partial assimilation of partisan agendas take place in the traditional public sphere, through which the media outlets tend to reproduce the priority issues of the political parties in their same ideological sphere.

### 5.3. *The agendas of the political blogosphere*

Compared to the issue alignment between the political parties and the traditional press, the political blogosphere is more pluralistic, both in terms of journalist blogs and citizen blogs. *El Blog de Federico's* agenda, for example, contains an independent set of issues, focused on the author's own priorities (nationalism, the Basque nationalist left, corruption and internal party politics) and unrelated to the issues prioritized by the political parties (Figure 5).

Despite the obvious limitation of the sample size (two articles published during the campaign), which prevents us from reaching any definitive conclusions, it is clear that this blog does not reproduce the issues that the two major Spanish political parties tried to transfer to the public sphere during the 2011 electoral campaign (economic issues for the conservatives and social issues for the socialists).

**Figure 5:** The *El Blog de Federico* agenda (N=2)

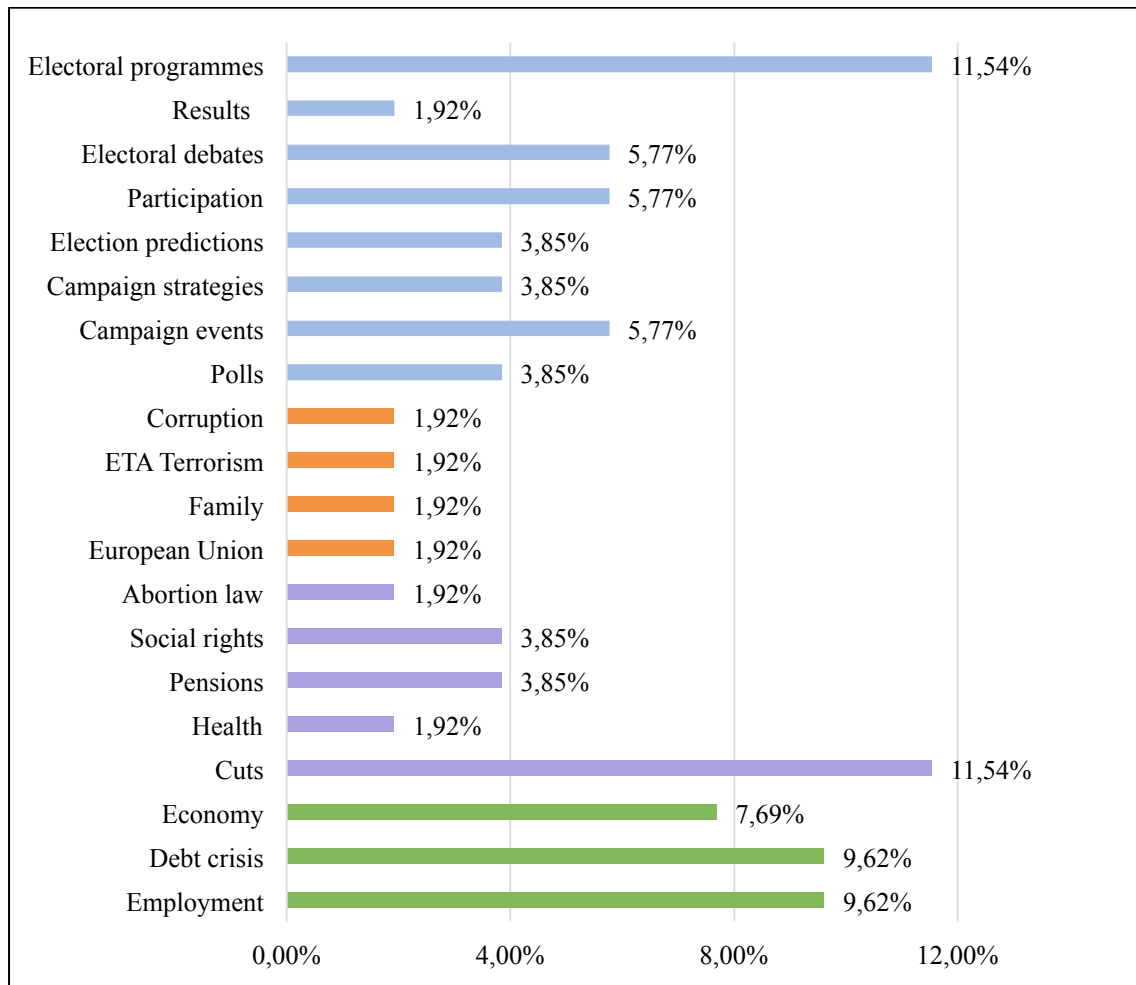


On another note, the *Escolar.net* agenda pays special attention to the strategic (polls, electoral predictions, electoral strategies) and symbolic aspects (events, debates, results) of the campaign (Figure 6). In policy terms, however, this journalist's agenda does seem sensitive to the partisan agendas, given that it shows both an economic and a social bias. Both unemployment and the crisis are addressed in 9.62% of the analysed posts. Moreover,

**Building the news media agenda: Spanish political parties' influence on traditional media and blogosphere agendas during 2011 electoral campaign**

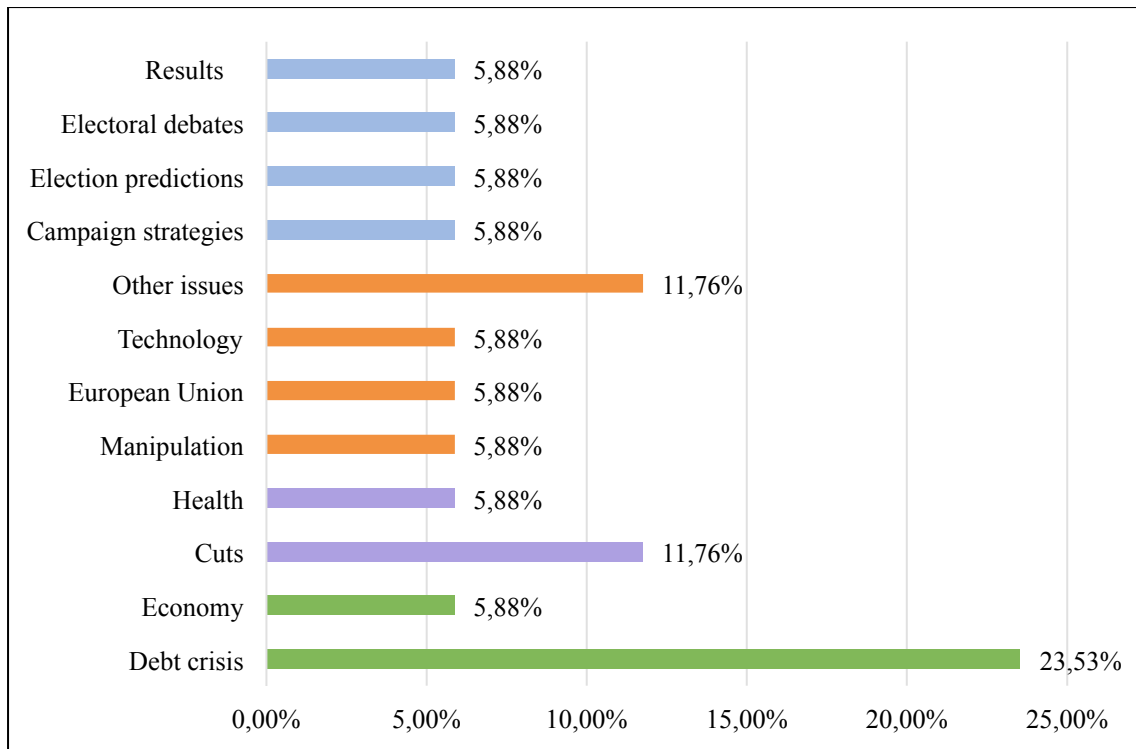
7.69% of the articles are related to other economic issues, which means that 26.92% of the articles deal with economic issues. Social issues are addressed nearly as often. If we include cuts to social spending, public healthcare, the pension system, gender equality policies and abortion laws, issues related to social rights and welfare policies make up 23.08% of this sample. Cuts to social spending represent the most salient issue, present in 11.54% of the articles. Undoubtedly, the balance between the frequencies of economic issues (26.92%), which dominate the public debate due to the recession, and those issues related to social rights and welfare state policies (23.08%), points to a marked affinity with the socialist agenda, comparable to that between the traditional media and the political parties.

**Figure 6.** The *Escolar.net* agenda (N=19)

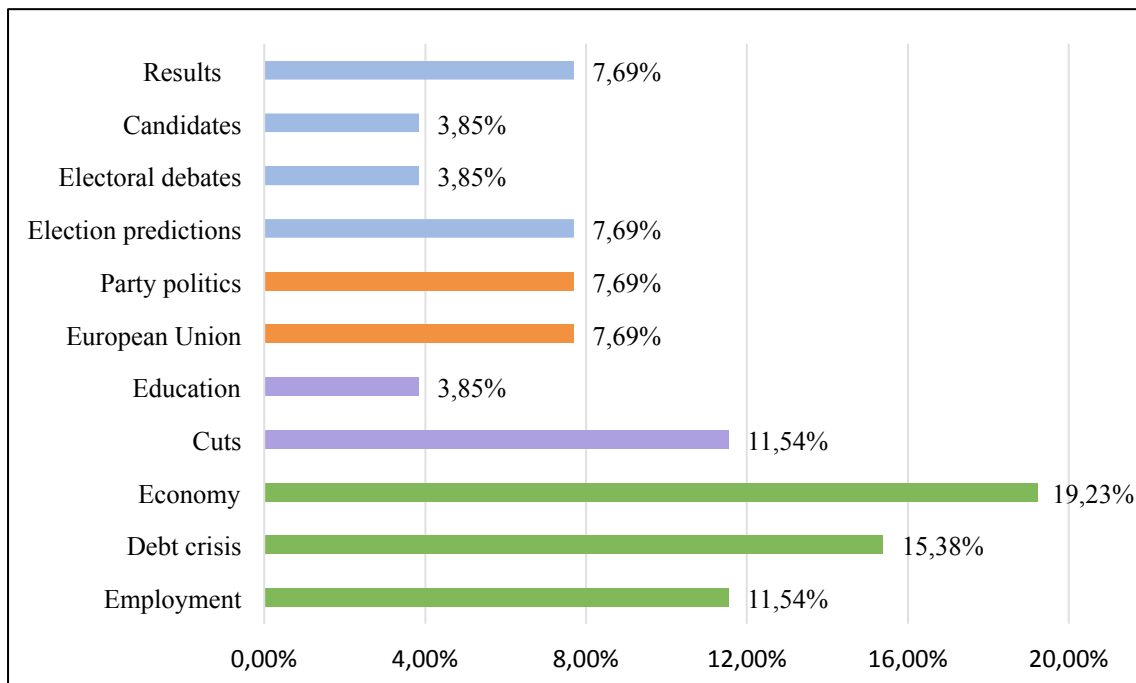


Regarding citizen blogs, *Desde el Exilio* pays particular attention to the public debt crisis (23.53%), an issue seen in nearly one of four articles (Figure 7). Moreover, other economic issues appear in 5.88% of the sample, bringing the overall frequency of economic issues to 29.41%. In addition, spending cuts are the subject of 11.76% of the posts, which generally deal with the need to implement structural adjustments, but not the sustainability of the Welfare State. Not surprisingly, social issues are largely absent, except for healthcare, which appears in 5.88% of the posts.

**Figure 7.** The *Desde el Exilio* agenda (N=6)



**Figure 8.** The *Materias Grises* agenda (N=9)



Lastly, the analysis shows that *Materias Grises* addresses a variety of economic issues (such as financing problems, bureaucratic obstacles to starting business in Spain or the European Central Bank's economic policy) in 19.23% of the sample (Figure 8). The debt crisis

and employment, in turn, appear in 15.38% and 11.54% of Senserrich's posts, respectively. Thus, economic issues in their totality appear in 46.15% of the posts. Although the economy dominates the agenda of *Materias Grises*, social spending cuts also appear in 11.54% of the posts, and public education is addressed in 3.85%. In total, therefore, social issues are present in 15.38% of the posts. Lastly, issues concerning the European Union and internal party politics, in reference to the future of the PSOE, are both present in 7.69% of the blog's articles.

Through our analysis of the citizen blogs, we can neither identify a marked influence by partisan agendas nor infer clear processes of agenda assimilation. Nonetheless, there is somewhat of a thematic relationship, as reflected by the appearance of economic and social issues in *Materias Grises* and the frequency of economic issues in *Desde el Exilio*. But these thematic similarities are considerably weaker than those found between the traditional media agendas and the *Escolar.net* agenda, and they cannot be considered conclusive.

## **6. Conclusions**

The results of this study point to two significantly different agendas advanced by the political actors, notwithstanding the economy's overwhelming dominance of the campaign: for the conservatives, the agenda addresses strictly economic issues, while the socialist agenda combines these issues with a defence of the Welfare State.

Comparing the partisan agendas with those of the traditional press revealed that *El Mundo's* editorials exclusively prioritise economic issues while completely ignoring social issues, whereas *El País* dedicates an equal amount of attention to each set of issues. In other words, both papers disseminate and publicly support the issues the parties try to transfer to the electorate throughout the campaign, acting as the former's strategic allies.

Accordingly, we can reasonably assume that the origin of each paper's editorial agenda stems from that of the political party in its respective ideological sphere. This convergence allows us to validate the first hypothesis (H1), inasmuch as both newspapers reproduce the parties' issue priorities during the campaign.

In the blogosphere, however, the results paint a more heterogeneous picture. On one hand, there is indeed a nearly perfect alignment between *Escolar's* blog and the socialist agenda, just as we saw in the traditional media. This situation demonstrates that occasionally blogs written by journalists mirror the partisan and aligned logic of the traditional media. The *Losantos* blog, however, presents an independent agenda which is not in line with the conservatives' issue priorities, but rather deals with classic concerns of the Spanish right.

On the other hand, our research does not suggest that political actors are capable of shaping the agendas of citizen blogs. Though we have found some thematic similarities between the agendas of bloggers and those of the political parties, they do not allow us to infer any processes of agenda building. Quite the contrary, the citizen blogs, when compared to their journalistic counterparts and especially with traditional media outlets, show greater levels of independence from their ideological spheres of reference.

Therefore, we must reject the second research hypothesis (H2), which posited that the political Spanish blogosphere would emulate the partisan alignment of the traditional media. The blogs do not always act as the parties' allies during the electoral contests; some of them feature issues from both of the partisan agendas, not just those issues prioritised by the more ideologically similar party. This situation demonstrates a certain opening of the traditional public sphere, in addition to a mitigation of its polarized nature, thanks to the emergence of the Internet.

In conclusion, this study confirms the existence of a marked thematic alignment between the agendas of political parties and traditional media during the electoral

campaign, but it also shows that this convergence is mitigated in the blogosphere (with the exception of Escolar.net), where a more independent debate of the parties' programme priorities takes place.

It seems reasonable to tentatively interpret this alignment as the result of an influence by the political actors over the media that belong in their respective ideological spheres. In other words, to infer that it is the result of a media agenda-building process carried out by the political parties. This interpretation, moreover, seems particularly plausible if we keep in mind the polarized pluralism of the Spanish media system, which shows high levels of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Nonetheless, this initial interpretation should be confirmed by future studies, given the methodological limitations of this study. This is because, first of all, the methodology employed (content analysis) only allows us to verify the existence of issue alignment, but it does not account for processes through which actors attempt to influence one another, nor does it address the direction of this hypothetical influence. To that end, methods that include more complex statistical analysis need to be designed.

Secondly, future studies will have to investigate the consistency of this agenda alignment through larger corpus, and in longer time frames, including not only electoral contests but also periods without any electoral campaigns.

Finally, we should point out that this study is limited to the first-level of agenda setting and addresses neither the issue attributes nor the frames through which political parties and the news media interpret social reality. Future studies should also analyse if this issue alignment between political and media actors also extends to the second-level of agenda setting and the frames used in interpreting reality.

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### **Appendix: Content analysis categories**

- 1) Employment / Unemployment
- 2) Taxes
- 3) Social spending cuts
- 4) Debt crisis
- 5) Housing
- 6) Economy (other issues)
- 7) Education
- 8) Healthcare
- 9) Public security
- 10) Family
- 11) Immigration
- 12) Pensions
- 13) Territorial organization of the State
- 14) Nationalism
- 15) Terrorism / ETA
- 16) Terrorism / Islamism
- 17) Negotiations with ETA
- 18) Illegalisation of the Basque nationalist left
- 19) 15 March movement
- 20) Polls
- 21) Party coalitions
- 22) Campaign events
- 23) Campaign organization
- 24) Campaign strategies
- 25) Election predictions
- 26) Electoral programmes
- 27) Participation vs Abstention
- 28) Citizen participation
- 29) Corruption
- 30) Infrastructure
- 31) National Hydrological Plan
- 32) Manipulation of information – public media
- 33) Manipulation of information –private media
- 34) Electoral debates
- 35) International politics
- 36) Culture
- 37) Private copying levy
- 38) The information society / new technology
- 39) Gender equality / social rights
- 40) Abortion law
- 41) Public financing of electoral campaigns
- 42) Agriculture
- 43) European Union
- 44) Urban issues
- 45) Industry
- 46) Environment
- 47) The Historical Memory Law
- 48) Negative campaigning (news based entirely on direct attacks on the political rival)
- 49) Justice system
- 50) The Church, relations with the Church / Catholicism
- 51) Others
- 52) N/A /not related to the electoral campaign
- 53) ETA's cessation of violence
- 54) Candidates (personality, qualities)
- 55) Internal party politics
- 56) Anecdotes. Non-political campaign aspects (aesthetics, frivolous issues, etc.).
- 57) Election results