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## **“Follow the Closing of the Campaign on Streaming”: the Use of Twitter by Spanish Political Parties during the 2014 European Elections.**

**Abstract:** The results of the elections to the European Parliament of May 25, 2014 marked a before and an after for Spanish politics. This influential European campaign took place at a moment when internet use was well established as a tool, with political parties and candidates actively using social media. This paper aims to research whether Spanish parties are using Twitter to develop interactive communication, or simply for broadcasting messages. Thus, the Twitter activity of various political parties during the 2014 European campaign is content-analysed. Results indicate that activity seems to depend on ideology, that parties are revealed to be committed to unidirectional communication/broadcasting, and that debate on Twitter is fundamentally between the politicians themselves. On a theoretical level, our data are in line with the idea that the normalisation hypothesis tends to prevail.

**Keywords:** Interactivity; Social Media; Twitter; Election Campaigns; Internet and Politics

## **Introduction**

The results of the elections to the European Parliament of May 25, 2014 marked a before and an after for Spain, to the point where one could talk about a reconfiguration of political power in the country. In the European Elections of 2009, the two traditionally major parties—Partido Popular (Popular Party, PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, PSOE)—had achieved the greater part of the 54 seats assigned to Spain in the European Parliament. However, in 2014 neither of the two parties managed to come near reaching an absolute majority. Although the conservative PP won the elections, it received barely 26.06% of the total vote. The centre-left PSOE received 14 seats (23%), and the left coalition party Izquierda Plural (The Plural Left) won 6 seats (9.99%)—tripling their results from 2009. Another minor party, Unión Progreso y Democracia (Union, Progress, and Democracy, UPyD), achieved the remarkable result of 4 seats (6.5%). However, the real surprise was Podemos (We Can), a new party that won 5 seats (7.97%).

The European voting heralded the beginning of the end of the reign of the two-party system which has traditionally enjoyed very solid support in Spain. PSOE and PP lost parliamentary seats; minor parties obtained relevant results; and new emerging forces came into power. The fact that Podemos had been constituted a mere 129 days prior to the elections, and held views that were originally found on the radical left, is another factor that makes the 2014 elections a relevant phenomenon. These changes were also taking place in a socially convulsive context after the success of protest movements in Spain—in fact, Podemos can be understood as the political expression of the anti-austerity movement 15-M (“May 15”). The emergence of Podemos—which after the December 2015 general elections has become the third political force in Spain—was the preamble of the reinforcement experienced by Ciudadanos (Citizens), a

libertarian-leaning party that was originally limited to Catalonia, but has become another serious challenger to the two-party rule.

The influential 2014 campaign took place at a moment when internet use was well established in Spain. With political actors actively using social networking, Spain is immersed in what Davis et al. (2009) conceptualise as a phase of post-maturation in internet campaigning, after 2006. During this phase, campaigns begin to look to venues such as social networking sites (SNS), which have become integral tools in the arsenal of political communication worldwide. In particular, Twitter, a SNS which was launched in 2006 and has enjoyed tremendous popularity, is now a part of campaigns' media strategy. It should not be surprising then that the political role of Twitter has become a consolidated research field. Studies have been conducted in very disparate countries such as the US (Golbeck et al., 2010; Bekafigo and McBride, 2013; Mirer and Bode, 2015), the Netherlands (Vergeer et al., 2011; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013), Brazil (Gilmore and Howard, 2014), Canada (Small, 2011); Pakistan (Ahmed and Skoric, 2014); Sweden (Larsson and Moe, 2011); or the UK (Jensen and Anstead, 2014). Research has also centred on different aspects, such as the content of the communication (Golbeck et al., 2010); the way in which the candidates use Twitter to inform, communicate, and connect with members of the public (Vergeer et al., 2011); the use of Twitter by minor party candidates (Christensen, 2013); or the personalisation of campaigns (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013).

In Spain, Twitter has been used for political communication at least since 2010 (Congosto, 2015), becoming an established media tool in the November 2011 general elections (García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2014). In this country, political use of Twitter has also become an area of inquiry, with a considerable body of research on topics such as the reach of messages or the behaviour of candidates when using Twitter

(Criado et. al, 2013); the relationships between political parties, party-affiliated cyber-activists, and civil society (Franco Buendia, 2014); or the use of interactive elements (Zugasti Azagra and Pérez González, 2015). The latter points to the primary objective concerning this paper: the interactive use of Twitter in an electoral context.

### **Interactivity, Dialogue, and the Limits of Twitter Conversation**

Theorisation on the political possibilities of the internet has revolved around such concepts as proximity, dialogue, and horizontal relationships. The idea of a potential increase in direct contact with the voter (Powell and Cowart, 2003), or the vision of the internet as facilitating citizen participation and engagement in the political process (Bekafigo and McBride, 2013; Vergeer et al., 2011), can be related to the notion of the internet as a place for open deliberation, in conditions of equality finding its roots in a primitive techno-enthusiasm (Loader and Mercea, 2011). Already in 2000, Stromer-Galley referred to the internet as a “magic elixir” towards which academics looked to “reinvigorate the masses to participate in the process of government” (2000: 113). Some version of this perspective persists—as Loader and Mercea point out (2011: 758), “a fresh wave of technological optimism has more recently accompanied the advent of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikies and the blogosphere”.

Nonetheless, earlier studies generally departed from such positive expectations (Slevin, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Later studies have been even more negative, suggesting that offline power structures are mirrored online—this is the so-called *normalisation hypothesis* (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). In an early formulation, Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe pointed out that this hypothesis “asserts that as the

Internet develops, patterns of socioeconomic and political relationships on-line come to resemble those of the real world” (1999: 26). Those supporting the hypothesis affirm that the web is shaped by features of society, so that parties use the internet in ways that replicate models already existing offline—in this regard, the hypothesis can be related to the idea that online communication supports the dominant parties’ electoral advantages (Klinger, 2013). Normalisation implies that inequalities among political actors are replicated online, and parties employ traditional campaign techniques instead of adapting to internet novelties (Schweitzer, 2005). Additionally, normalisation is related to a lack of interactivity, since the hypothesis predicts, among other things, that websites will not be used to increase participation (Margolis et al., 1999).

The normalisation hypothesis, along with the *innovation hypothesis*, makes up a popular dichotomy pertaining to online political activity (Larsson, 2013). In contrast to the normalisation hypothesis, the supporters of the innovation hypothesis argue that the media-specific characteristics of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) contribute to a fundamental change in the way that politics is presented. This hypothesis suggests the introduction of new Internet-driven political practices, and relates to notions of individually selected information, as well as rational democratic discourse, policy discussions, and more decentralized debate (Larsson, 2013; Schweitzer, 2008; Vergeer et al., 2011; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). Additionally, it implies that the Internet makes information dissemination more efficient. Alongside hypertextuality, multimedia, and information capacity, interaction is one of the features that cause defenders of the innovation hypothesis to believe that the presentation of politics is going to change (Larsson, 2013; Schweitzer, 2008).

Interactivity refers to an understanding of communication as a two-way process that encourages dialogue. In the political context, interactivity should be understood as

“user-to-user interaction” (Small, 2011: 887), in such a way that interaction goes hand in hand with the idea of dialogue with citizens and voters, and beyond the mere transmission of information. Interactivity, therefore, is a relevant factor in the historical evolution of e-campaigns (Serfaty, 2012). In general, the role of web interactivity offers disparate results. In the context of the 2008 presidential campaigns, Obama and John McCain’s sites encouraged interactivity, even if both sites “attempted to harness online enthusiasm for real, practical campaign purposes” (Barko Germany, 2009: 156). And in Norway, politicians have identified dialogue with the voters as one of the central motives for using social media (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). Nevertheless, the outcome of web interactivity is not always expressed this way. For instance, it seems that governmental use of the internet is more dedicated to publication rather than to real interaction (Castells, 2001: 177). Additionally, the potential for interactivity between candidates and voters is not fully exploited when this media is used for electoral campaigns (Canel, 2006: 76). And if a content analysis of 393 websites of American candidates running for gubernatorial and Senate office in 1998 and 2000 revealed that interactivity indicators—such as the inclusion of an email address—rose during that period on those sites (Greer and LaPointe, 2005), a study by De Landtsheer et al. (2001) found little interactivity on varying websites of European politicians.

In a context where web 2.0 applications are considered “as providing new opportunities to positively increase dialogue between people” (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013: 400), social media hold, almost intrinsically, the potential for horizontal communication, distancing itself from traditional mass communication. In fact, interaction is considered one of the characteristics of communication among social media users (Enli and Moe, 2013). Castells highlights the potential “offered for online political interaction by the explosion of social networking sites” (2009: 390).

Twitter in particular makes a more direct relationship between voters and politicians possible (Graham et al., 2013), as well as increasing dialogue with potential voters (Towner and Dulio, 2012). Nevertheless, the use of Twitter for the development of political interactivity offers varying results. In their study of the 2010 Brazilian elections, Gilmore and Howard observed that Twitter and Facebook “are fostering new styles of conversation between candidates and voters” (2014: 54), while Enli and Skogerbø (2013) found that in use of Twitter and Facebook in Norway in 2011 more than half of the tweets included features of dialogue. Regarding the 2010 British elections, Graham et al. (2013) found that even though politicians used Twitter basically in a unidirectional manner, 19% of the candidates’ tweets interacted in one way or another with the voters. Vergeer et al. seem to find middle-ground on the use of Twitter within the context of the 2009 European elections in the Netherlands: even though “candidates’ networks are predominantly for informing citizens”, “there is at least some interactivity between candidate and citizens” (2011: 497, 498). Meanwhile, Jensen and Anstead have studied the use of Facebook and Twitter in the UK general elections of 2010, comparing the use on the national level of the campaign with that of the municipal campaign in Birmingham. Their study indicates that even though social media is used on both levels for the unidirectional transmission of information, in Birmingham there seems to have been a greater emphasis on the creation of personal connections between the candidates and the public (Jensen and Anstead, 2014). Studying Pakistan in 2013, Ahmed and Skoric (2014) found differences in the interactivity of four political parties: while one party barely reached 3% in the number of @-replies, other party got over 20%. Other studies are less ambivalent as to the scarce interactive use of Twitter. Golbeck et al.’s (2010) analysis of American Congress members in 2009 indicated that Twitter is fundamentally used for self-promotion.



Similarly, a study on Australian politicians' use of Twitter between May 2009 and February 2010 indicated more broadcasting than engaging in dialogue (Grant et al., 2010). Mirer and Bode's work on the 2010 US midterm elections shows that Twitter "is not a medium through which candidates expect to interact" (2015: 464), while Larson and Moe's study on the Swedish elections of the same year indicates that Twitter use is related more to dissemination than dialogue (2011).

In Spain, a study on the 2012 Basque elections indicates that if the tweets that provide some kind of interactivity are more frequent than those that do not, the reaction that occurs does not really imply a relationship between politicians and citizens (Cebrián Guinovart et al., 2013). In their study of the municipal elections of 2011, Criado et al. (2013) found that there is not much exploitation of the potential offered by Twitter for candidates to dialogue with their constituents. However, García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra's analysis of the presidential candidates Mariano Rajoy (PP) and Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba's (PSOE) use of Twitter in 2011 indicated a "remarkable capacity for dialogue" (2014: 302). Franco Buendía's study (2014) of various elections that took place in Catalonia indicates that the percentage of responses on Twitter by Partit Dels Socialistes de Catalunya-PSOE (Catalonian Socialist Party-PSOE) went from 15.6% in the regional election of 2010 to 1.6% in 2012. Thus, it could be said that in Spain there is not excessive enthusiasm for political interactivity on social media. It is at this point where our investigation is framed.

### **Research Focus and Methodology**

This article seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on Twitter and electoral campaigns. We begin with one of the classic questions posed by Towner and

Dulio (2012) on the role of the media during campaigns: How do candidates, political parties, and interest groups use the media? With this objective in mind, we focus on how Spanish parties used Twitter during the European Parliamentary Elections of 2014. Aside from offering a changing political map—partly in response to the demands of popular movements for a new way of doing politics—Spain is an interesting object of study because it is a country where Twitter use is rather widespread—it ranks third in the world, after Japan and Holland (García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2014). On the other hand, and given its relevance for Spanish politics, the 2014 elections offer an interesting context for analysing party-citizens relationships. This last point is important, because we apply to Spain what Grant et al. designate as the question that “lies at the heart of all discussions of the political potential of new communication technologies: does this technology broaden – or restrict – the space available for political dialogue?” (2010: 582). Thus, we research if Spanish parties are simply broadcasting messages on Twitter, or whether they are interacting and widening the space for dialogue. Along with this research objective, we aim to quantify party activity on Twitter, to analyse the main themes that are being communicated, and to study the functions that the tweets serve.

The reviewed literature presents evidence in favour of, as well as against the promotion of interactivity. Notwithstanding, the prevailing evidence about Spain leads us to formulate the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Interactivity is a secondary phenomenon in the use of Twitter by Spanish political parties during the 2014 European Elections.*

Additionally, we propose four research questions to profile the content and dynamics of Twitter use during these elections:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: *To what extent are Spanish political parties using Twitter to interact with others?*

RQ<sub>2</sub>: *With whom are Spanish parties interacting?*

RQ<sub>3</sub>: *About which topics are they tweeting?*

RQ<sub>4</sub>: *What functions do their tweets serve?*

To answer this, we carry out a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) of the tweets posted by different parties in the context of the European elections. We tallied the tweets posted during the official campaigning period, from 9 to 23 May 2014. Consequently, it was not a sampling, but rather the entire universe of messages posted by different parties during the campaign. In this line, an electoral campaign period is an advantageous time for this kind of study because it allows us to focus on “times when political communication is at its most strategic, pre-planned, and intense” (Enli and Moe, 2013: 638), thus providing optimal material for analysing party behaviour. We selected the Twitter accounts of the parties, and not the candidates, because Spanish political and electoral system is based more on parties than on candidates, as is made evident by the fact that holding primaries within parties is not a common practice. At the same time, and given the variability of the candidates that run for election, examining the official, party-level communication offers a look at the permanent and official posture of the institutions, as well as a way of comparing ideological postures. Furthermore, by concentrating on the party accounts we avoid selecting ephemeral accounts, created ad hoc for the elections.

The tweets belong to the official accounts of several national parties: Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Partido Popular, Izquierda Unida (United Left, IU—the most important component of the already mentioned Izquierda Plural coalition), and Unión

Progreso y Democracia. Two new parties were added for whom the European elections were their first campaign: the aforementioned Podemos, and Vox. Vox came on the scene at the end of 2013 and is ideologically to the right of PP. By selecting these parties, we wanted to eschew the traditional PP/PSOE duopoly, precisely because in 2014 this system began to break down<sup>1</sup>. The inclusion of new parties is pertinent because they usually concentrate on SNS, which offer media to carry out campaigns at lower costs (Gueorguieva, 2008). We should also highlight the enormous ideological variety in the sample: positions that could originally be found on the radical left (Podemos), far right positions (Vox), democratic socialists (IU), centre-left (PSOE), and centre-right (PP and UPyD).

The tweets were captured using Twitter's Streaming API (<https://dev.twitter.com/streaming/overview>) and Twitter's Search API (<https://dev.twitter.com/rest/public/search>). Both the capture and the subsequent processing of the message to generate the metrics were done through Python. From the initial collection of 6,323 tweets, the list was refined, erasing duplicate tweets, thereby yielding a result of 6,316 units of analysis.

A frequency analysis was applied to these messages which is methodologically based on the operationalisation put forth by Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff and van 't Haar (2013), who develop a coding scheme for studying the behaviour of British candidates on Twitter. For doing this they proposed different categories: type of tweets, the person interacted with, functions, and topics. As to the kind of tweet, three types are distinguished: normal post, @-reply, retweet (the symbols used are, e.g., 'RT' or 'via')—a similar typology to that used by Larsson and Moe (2011). However we differed from Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff and van 't Haar, in that we did not take into account RT with comments, understanding that this function is similar to that of the

normal retweet—additionally, the Streaming API we used does not discriminate between RT and RT with comments. From this typology, the @-reply is operationalised as an indicator of interaction—in fact, the reply has already been used as evidence of dialogue and interactivity (Ahmed and Skoric, 2014; Criado et al., 2013). Additionally, all those tweets coded as @-replies were subsequently coded as to the person interacted with. Among the categories used, we can find public or citizen—a user with no political ties—or journalist—when the user identifies themselves as such on their profile. To make this distinction, the codifiers had to look at the profile, and in some cases check the electronic addresses of these descriptions.

In considering the functions of the tweets, Graham et al differentiate (1) (update from the) campaign trail, (2) campaign promotion, (3) campaign action, (4) call to vote, (5) political news/report, (6) other news/report, (7) position taking/own stance, (8) party stance, (9) critiquing/arguing, (10) requesting public input, (11) advice giving/helping, (12) acknowledgement, (13) personal, and (14) other. We have combined two functions, “(update from the) campaign trail” and “campaign action”, into one function we call “campaign trail” to codify the tweets that narrate what is happening with the campaign, in real time or the past. Considering topics, Graham et al distinguish between (1) animal rights, (2) civil and human rights, (3) crime and judicial proceedings, (4) business and economy, (5) education, (6) environment, (7) EU, (8) government, (9) health and social welfare, (10) immigration, (11) military and defence, (12) religion, (13) science and technology, (14) war and conflicts, (15) world events, (16) national events and heritage, (17) infrastructure, (18) campaign and party affairs, and (19) norms and values. In the interest of adapting the scheme to the Spanish context, we included (20) corruption and (21) nationalism, that is, two fundamental issues for understanding contemporary Spain. Regarding functions and topics, we employed excluding criteria. Intercoder reliability

was calculated through Krippendorff's alpha. To achieve this, the coders analysed a random sample of tweets. The reliability index we obtained was .0883, which is regarded as acceptable (Krippendorff, 2004).

## **Results**

As to the distribution of tweets during the campaign, Figure 1 indicates that the most active parties on Twitter were in the following order: Podemos, IU, and UPyD. The traditional parties, PP and PSOE, were less active—in the second case, the activity was almost insignificant some days, which also occurred with newcomers Vox.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Precisely, it was Vox that produced the most interesting data. They had only 444 tweets, thus being the only minor party that did not show more activity than the big parties (Table 1). However, Podemos' tweets (1,681), more than tripled those of Vox, while UPyD (1,197) more than doubled Vox's tweets. Clearly, Twitter activity is dominated by two left-leaning parties (Podemos and IU) while the protagonists of a decades-long duopoly (PP and PSOE) are among the parties that tweet with lesser frequency.

INSERT TABLE 1

Table 1 also provides interesting information on the most common type of tweet, indicating that messages that make dialogue possible (replies) are, across the board, less frequent than normal tweets—in fact, the total number of normal tweets is almost ten times greater than that of replies. An example of normal tweet can be observed in the following PSOE message:

Ramón Jáuregui's participation has ended #L6Ndebateuropa. Thanks for following us #VotaPSOE

(@PSOE, May 10, 22:28)

IU, Podemos, and PP are at the top of the list for normal tweets. Retweets, although more frequent, are also always fewer in number than normal tweets, except in the case of Vox and UPyD, the latter being the party that retweeted most often. Thus, the data indicate a more traditional use of Twitter on the part of the more conservative and ideologically traditionalist parties (PP and VOX, who post the fewest retweets), while new parties like Podemos use retweets intensively. A more detailed look at the replies (Figure 2) indicates the marginal use of the horizontal potential of Twitter in general terms, as no party reaches 8% when referring to mentions. This situation is emphasised in the so-called traditional parties, with a use of only 1.29% in PSOE's case and an insignificant 0.87% in the case of PP. Considering this, the minor and/or emergent parties surpass 6%. The most noteworthy case is that of a traditional, but very left-leaning party, IU, which reached 7.49% in their use of replies, thereby making them the party with the most replies, and the most interactive political actor, as exemplifies the following (and concise) tweet:

@PueyoSomos thanks ;-)

(@iunida, May 13, 12:48)

## INSERT FIGURE 2

Regarding the type of user who engages in interaction, it is revealing that the debate generated is mostly between the politicians themselves, and not so much with the citizens. Moreover, the political class is the audience with whom all the parties, across the board, interact the most. Figure 3 shows the type of user with whom the parties interact, with Vox particularly standing out in the high degree with which it interacts with politicians. Although minor parties like IU and UPyD engage in more interaction with citizens, dialogue does not reach 10% with any of the parties—except in the case of Podemos, which is the party that dialogues the most with citizens. An example of this relationship can be observed in the following Podemos tweet:

.@Maxuxta to avoid irregularities you can become a representative on the 25th.  
(@ahorapodemos, May 9, 11:13)

Furthermore, parties seem to interact with journalists but at very low percentages. In this context, the case of PP is especially remarkable, as their official account responded via reply to politicians that actively participated during the campaign, particularly Miguel Arias Cañete... who was their candidate.

## INSERT FIGURE 3



Regarding the function of the tweet (Figure 4), while PP and PSOE focus on the candidate, Podemos, IU, and UPyD have a more equal distribution. On the other hand, Vox uses Twitter for updating campaign trail events: 50% of their messages serve this function. In general, the “position taking/own stance” function is also relevant, particularly with traditional parties (PP exceeds 50%, while PSOE exceeds 40%). Additionally, and although in lesser measure, all parties engage in the “critiquing/arguing” function (the most belligerent parties in this sense are IU and UPyD), “Party stance” (with IU and UPyD being equal protagonists), and “campaign trail” (with Vox at the lead). The following UPyD tweet exemplifies the critiquing function:

Waste at airports without planes and construction for speculation. Little productive investment #MaitePagaza #L6NDebateuropa

(@UPyD, May 10, 21:33)

The parties barely use “Personal” (it is worth mentioning that the only party to use this function is Podemos, a party closely tied to its candidate), “Advice giving/helping”, or “Requesting public input”.

#### INSERT FIGURE 4

As to topics, again we find an endogamous use of Twitter, as the main topic across all parties is “campaign and party affairs” (Table 2). This topic exceeds 40% in all the parties, with Vox standing out regarding its use (76.58%).

## INSERT TABLE 2

Remarkably, an issue as important and wide-spread as “Corruption” is at this moment in time in Spain, barely entered the political debate. This is significant in the case of PP, because they do not mention it at all, while the parties that use it more are minor parties: UPyD is at the head of the list with 4.43%, Podemos holds 3.69%, and IU 3.58%. Another issue that was included ex professo for the present study was “Nationalism”, which is very important in Spain due to historical territorial problems in different areas of the country. The parties appear to avoid discussing this topic, especially those that address left-leaning voters. However, for the most conservative party in the study, Vox, it is of importance (it is their third most covered topic, 4.73%), followed by the centre-right parties UPyD (3.76%) and PP (1.6%). “Europe” is the second most debated topic—which is logical given that these were European elections. Nevertheless, and despite the theoretical relevance of this topic, it is not of primordial importance. With the exception of PSOE, this topic does not reach 20%—Vox’s 0.45% is particularly remarkable. It is also interesting that “Business and Economy” is addressed in certain measure by two parties with antagonistic ideology: PP (conservative) and IU (left-socialist). This is the third most debated topic for PP (13.99%), and the second for IU (15.31%). Of course they have radically different takes: while IU criticises the high level of unemployment in one of its tweets, the PP extols its own handling of the economy.

.@Canete2014\_ “As of today, our country has reduced unemployment more than any other in the European Union in the last few months” #GanaCañete  
#CaraACaraTVE

(@PPopular, May 15, 21:29)

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The first remarkable conclusion has to do with the scarce Twitter activity on the part of the main traditional parties, PP and PSOE. Perhaps this is due to the two parties' electoral machine, more concentrated on the mass media than on the new media. Nonetheless, our data does not indicate that emerging parties systematically use SNS in greater measure—in fact, in some cases there is marginal use of the new media. If we take into account the ideology variable, the analysis of Twitter activity has revealed varying results in past studies: for instance, Criado et al. (2013) indicate that PP's Twitter use is not much less than PSOE's; however, Abejón et al.'s data (2012) indicates that PSOE's candidate for the region of Madrid (Tomás Gómez) posted many more tweets than PP's candidate (Esperanza Aguirre) in the elections of 2011. Contextually, it must also be taken into account that Democratic Party candidates in the US are more enthusiastic about using the internet to communicate with their supporters than are their Republican counterparts, as is indicated by their use of Facebook (Williams and Gulati, 2007). Our findings point out that, even though there is not too much difference when comparing PP and PSOE, Twitter activity does seem to relate to ideology, insofar as leftist parties like Podemos and IU tend to be more active than rightist parties. Furthermore, it seems that the more the party is situated to the right, the less active they are on Twitter—with the exception of the centre-right UPyD. This could be due to the fact that Twitter users in Spain tend to be younger and more ideologically to the left

(Congosto, 2015), in such a way that conservative parties can find less of an echo among users. Pertaining to the Spanish left-leaning parties' Twitter use patterns, the citizen engagement with the 15-M movement is a fundamental motive. In the wake of the economic crisis and discontent with government cutbacks, citizen mobilisation began to gestate, crystallising into the popular protests of May 15, 2011. The final message, based on a critique of the traditional two-party system (García-Jiménez et al., 2014), demanded a more participatory democracy. The 15-M movement provoked a series of occupations and demonstrations that extended to more than fifty Spanish cities and would set a precedent for international initiatives such as Occupy Wall Street. The 15-M movement was also an example of Castells's concept of mass autocommunication, which is nothing more than a new way of doing interactive mass communication, many-to-many (Fernandez-Planells et al., 2014). Politically, 15-M created a favourable environment for left-leaning parties like Podemos. Therefore, the greater amount of Twitter activity from the left could be due to the critical mass of citizens mobilised by the protests against the cutbacks and the economic crisis (Jerez, D'Antonio Maceiras and Maestu, 2015). These mobilisations, generally orchestrated through social media, are key to understanding the greater presence of leftist discourse and parties, which found citizens open to progressive proposals through Twitter. More specifically, the fact that the most prolific parties (Podemos and IU) are on the radical left, could be related to the idea that the more extreme parties (on both the left and the right) are those which use Twitter to a greater extent in the European context (The Economist, 2015). Additionally, the conclusion that right-leaning parties use Twitter less is consistent with data indicating that in the 2009 European Elections the progressive candidates in the Netherlands were more active micro-bloggers than the centrist or conservative candidates (Vergeer et al., 2011).

Regarding interactivity, Spanish parties do not seem to take advantage of the possibilities for conversation made available by Twitter. Rather, just the opposite, they are excessively in debt to a classic vision of conventional media, centred on unidirectional communication and broadcasting. With its dearth of mentions/replies, and reflecting the data found in Larsson and Moe's study in Sweden (2011), the 2014 campaign shows barely any interaction that is remarkable, if not almost non-existent as in the case of PP—which is significant, given that it is the main Spanish political party. In this sense  $H_1$  is confirmed, and indicates that the broadcasting model seems to predominate in Spanish political micro-blogging, in line with the findings of other authors. Reflection on the causes of this unidirectional use could point to other factors, such as the partisan nature of this social network, in such a way that politicians would see their Twitter following as a mere support (Mirer and Bode, 2015), so it would not be necessary to dialogue too much as it would be interaction with voters who are already convinced. Additionally, our findings indicate that while the party that engages in dialogue the most is a left-socialist group (IU), the second and third place goes to fringe parties like the centre-rightist UPyD and the ultraconservative Vox. Thus, our study reinforces the notion that ideology is not a discriminating factor relative to the interactive use of media in Spain (Cebrián Guinovart et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the link between non-traditional and fringe parties, and a higher degree of dialogue, could be due to various factors. Podemos—the second party with the most replies in terms of frequency—is related to the so-called “new politics”, a label which includes actions that strive to “bring politics closer to the citizens” (Civieta, 2015), and is made up of a generation of young people who disagree with the state of things in general, including the way the political class has handled things, in particular. In this context, social media are fundamental communication vehicles. This type of

communication—which presumes to be “connected to the people” (a Podemos axiom)—is theoretically horizontal—an extension to the participative culture people are demanding. In the case of IU, interactivity depends on the party’s egalitarian ideology, as much as the fact that they attribute to themselves having been the pioneers of the “new politics”, claiming that they have set an example in opening the doors of the institutions to many people (Civieta, 2015). In UPyD’s case, and even though they are much more to the right than Podemos and IU, direct dialogue with the people has been a trademark (Europa Press, 2015). Likewise, a minor party like Vox resorts to proximity to the voters and talks about guaranteeing “a new way of doing politics, closer to the citizen” (cited in EFE, 2015). Beyond the particularities of each party, there is another factor that would link fringe parties to interactivity: the affordability of social media and the Internet in general. Thus, the parties with less presence in the mass media are more dedicated to the web for economic reasons, and are therefore more familiar with new media that make citizen response technologically possible.

Notwithstanding these possibilities, it must be pointed out that interactivity does not seem to have transferred fully to the arena of party propaganda. This contributes to our study reinforcing the sceptic vision of Spanish politicians’ use of social networks (Abejón et al., 2012). In this context, the endogamous nature that can characterise social media’s political discourse is another significant finding. Twitter debate occurs fundamentally among the politicians themselves, and does not so much engage Spanish citizens, which would be the most desirable scenario considering the potential of the tool. In any case it is worth highlighting that minor parties like IU and UPyD, or emergent parties like Podemos, are the ones that engage in more active communication with citizens, which might indicate that traditional parties are even more out of touch with voters. Additionally, our data is consistent with that found in Ahmed and Skoric’s

study (2014) in the context of Pakistan in 2013, where an emerging party interacted much more with the public.

The dynamic of the type of user extrapolates to the function of the tweets. Although parties like Podemos, IU, and UPyD exhibit a more balanced distribution of functions, and demonstrate a more diversified use of the tool, functions that stimulate dialogue, such as “Advice giving/helping” or “Requesting public input”, are barely used. Again, this reinforces a broadcasting-centric use of the new media. In this sense, the importance of “Position taking” in Spanish tweets contrasts with Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff and van’t Haar’s research on the general elections of 2010 in the UK, where position taking comprised only 3% of the tweets (2013: 705). In line with the endogamic nature of the tweets, we observe that the most extended topic addressed by all of the political parties is “Campaign and party affairs”; in other words, one could say that the European Campaign in Spain is a case of “Meta-campaigning, that is, communications about the state of the campaign” (Jensen and Anstead, 2014: 61), which could be related to, and not by coincidence, vertical and monologic communication (Jensen and Anstead, 2014). Parties are not only interacting very little with citizens; they mostly talk about themselves and their activities. As a tweet Vox posted on May 23 helpfully summarizes, “Follow the closing of the campaign on streaming”—a message that could serve as a symbolic synthesis of what Spanish parties seem to expect from the electorate: that they follow the leader. The relevance of meta-campaigning is in line with the 2011 Spanish elections, when Rajoy and Pérez Rubalcaba “tended to use Twitter mainly for talking about the campaign itself” (García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2014: 305), as well as Congosto’s study (2015) on the 2014 European Elections, where the campaign figured as one of the most frequent topics. This contrasts with Van Os et al.’s work (2007) on the European Elections of 2004,

which showed that the websites of the different political actors were used to communicate about European issues and events. This indicates that different formats of e-campaigning can be employed to communicate on different topics during European elections.

Beyond the discussion of empirical results, our study also presents certain theoretical implications. Particularly, the analysis of interactivity reminds us that the most celebratory perspectives about the internet's potential for dialogue could be related to a technological determinism that presupposes that technology has the ability *per se* for developing solutions and making possible “a particular value (whether this be a sense of community or greater democracy)” (Leung, 2005: 53). Facing this determinism, our study reinforces the idea that Twitter has no intrinsic political value and that, more generally, technology does not necessarily change the objectives of election campaigns (Towner and Dulio, 2012). Thus, even though the internet provides a channel for horizontal communication (Castells, 2001: 180), the use of ICT's by the political elites is mostly asymmetrical, basically only involving the voters for the benefit of the campaign (Greer and LaPointe, 2005). In other words, the intrinsic possibilities of the technology—horizontal and interactive, in this case—are not necessarily made reality in electoral behaviour. Social media echoes a more generalised feature of the internet: the coexistence of one-to-many mass communication, and one-to-one interactive communication (Dahlgren, 2005)—in this context, the usage of Twitter in Spain would be closer to a mass media logic than an interaction-oriented, network media logic (Klinger and Svensson, 2015).

Our findings are also in line with the affirmation that the normalisation hypothesis tends to prevail from the point of view of research (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). The defenders of this hypothesis indicate, among other things, that information is



provided through one-way communication, and that resources like party websites neglect interactive options, due to the fear of losing control of the message (Vergeer et al., 2011; Schweitzer, 2008); something similar to what Spanish parties seem to fear. So, the use of Twitter in the European Elections offers a more or less extreme example that e-campaigning does not necessarily change the way politics presents itself to the public; on the contrary, e-campaigning may reinforce power relationships (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). Faced with the perceptions of the internet as a “magic elixir” that would increase citizen participation, the behaviour of Spanish parties indicate that engagement is not a priority of electoral strategy. For this reason, it is necessary to be cautious about the democratic potential of social media for challenging the political domination of certain groups (Loader and Mercea, 2011).

Our study presents a series of limitations. One of them is the scarce interest European elections generate: participation in 2014 in Spain barely surpassed 45% (Ministerio del Interior, 2014), which indicates the disaffection of half of the electorate regarding European politics. This scant participation makes it necessary to continue testing the degree of dialogue produced in more engaging elections. Another limitation derives from the fact that the results are on the European Elections *in* Spain, and they may not be representative of the conduct of the parties in other countries. Consequently, a cross-national study could help us analyse if unidirectional communication is an especially accentuated characteristic in Spain, and if interactivity is a myth or a reality on a global level.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We did not take Ciudadanos into account for this study. Ciudadanos is an emerging political party nowadays, but at that time it was not a national party.

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Figure 1. Distribution of tweets by day and party (frequencies).

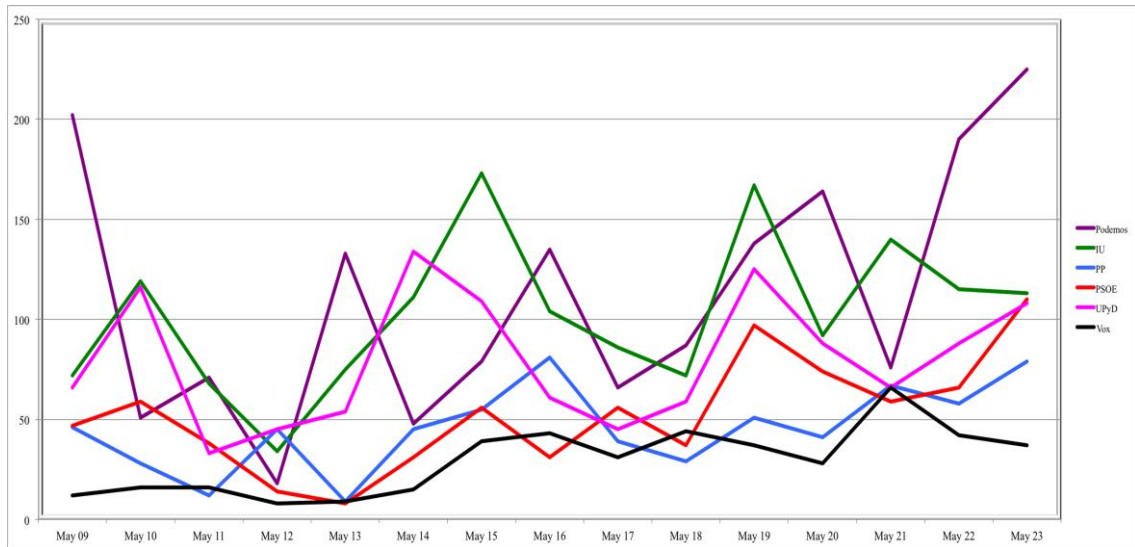




Table 1. Frequency and type of tweet by party (totals).

Type of tweet	PODEMOS	PP	PSOE	VOX	IU	UPyD	Total
Normal post	837	538	374	136	1004	364	3,253
Retweet	740	142	389	280	416	757	2,724
Reply	104	6	10	28	115	76	339
	1681	686	773	444	1535	1197	6,316

Figure 2. Replies by parties (percentages).

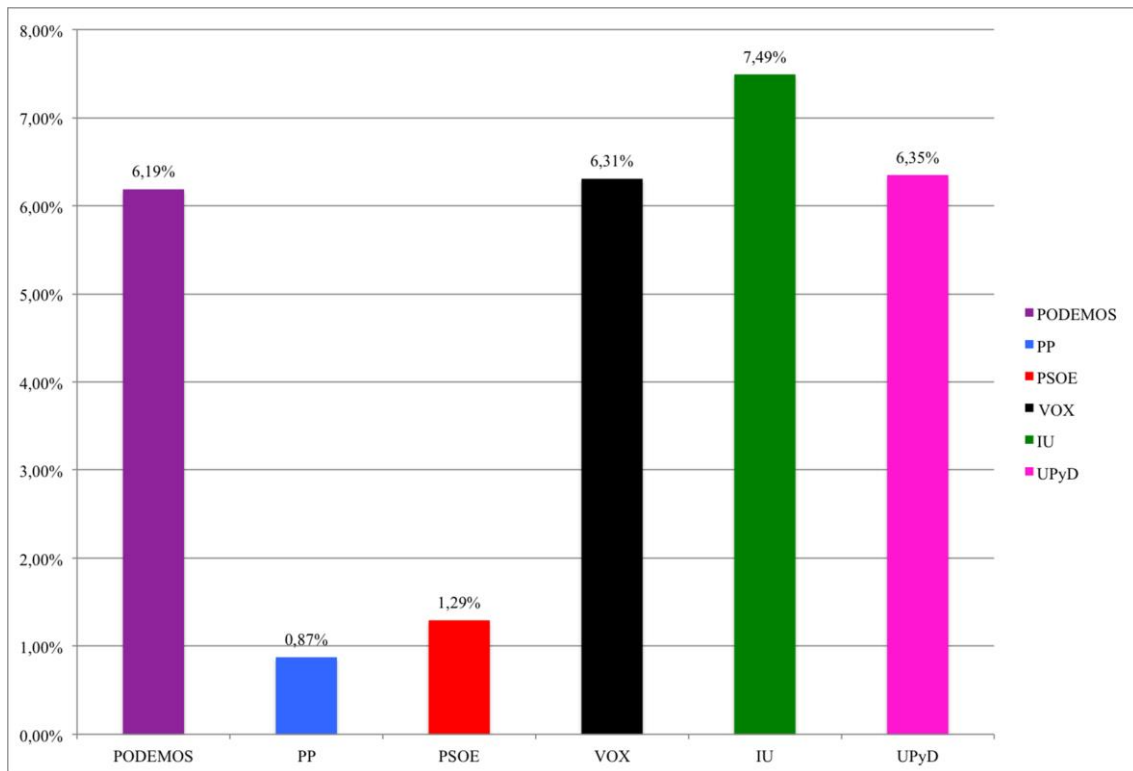


Figure 3. Type of user with whom parties interact (percentages).

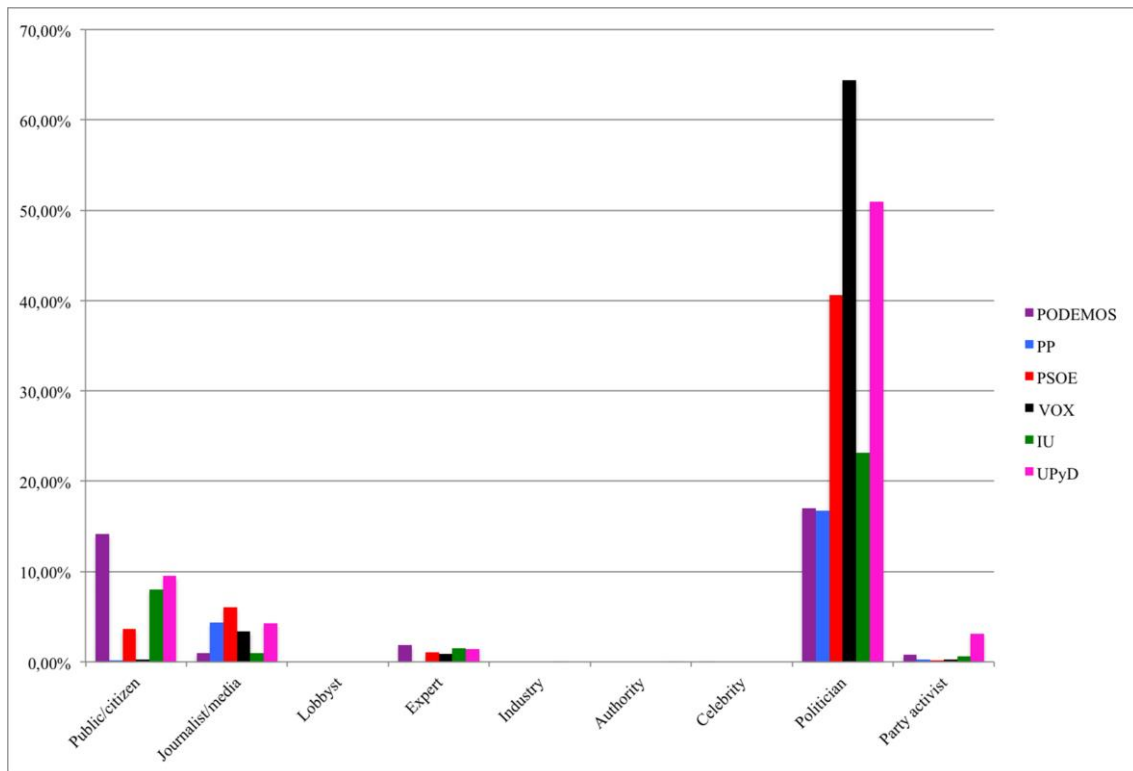


Figure 4. Tweet function by party (percentages).

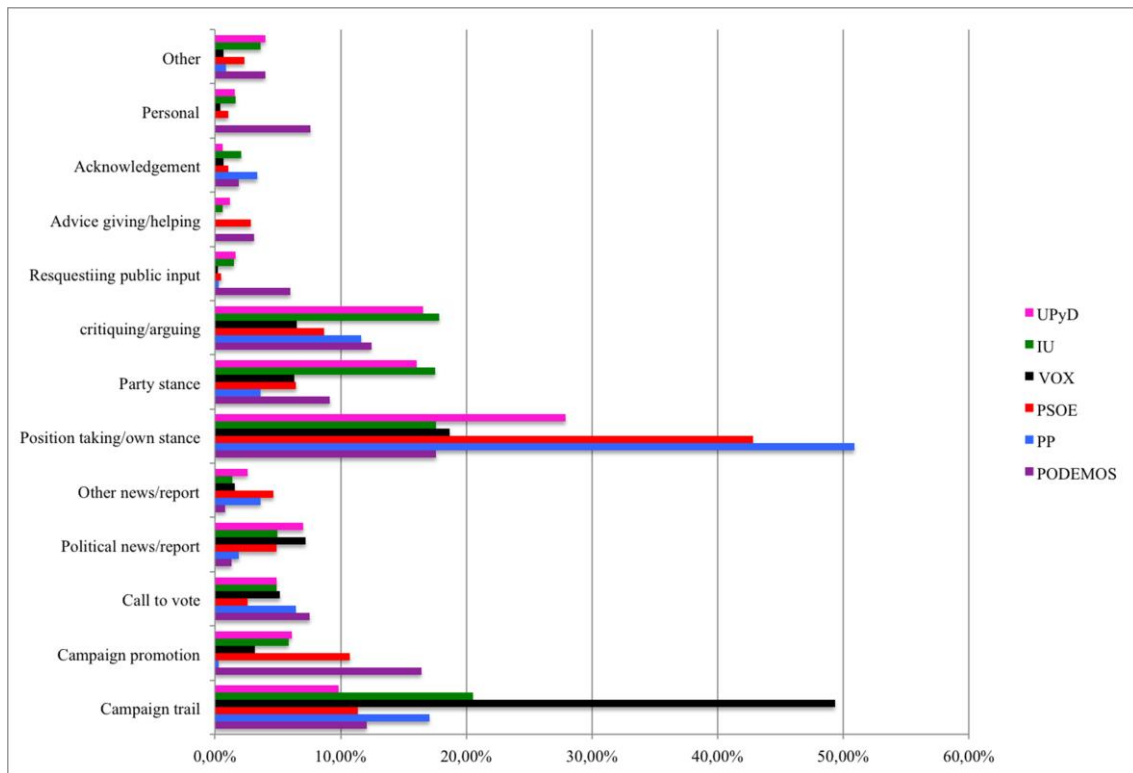


Table 2. Tweet topic by party (percentages).

Tweet topic	Podemos	PP	PSOE	VOX	IU	UPyD
Animal rights	0,12%	0,15%	0,00%	0,00%	0,07%	0,42%
Civil and human rights	2,74%	0,58%	5,95%	0,45%	4,10%	2,92%
Crime and judicial proceedings	0,30%	2,92%	1,29%	0,23%	1,04%	0,67%
Business and economy	5,65%	13,99%	8,15%	1,58%	15,31%	5,10%
Education	0,30%	0,29%	0,13%	0,23%	1,63%	1,75%
Environment	0,06%	0,00%	0,13%	0,00%	0,33%	1,84%
Europe	2,68%	11,95%	23,42%	0,45%	10,10%	18,71%
Government	9,70%	4,08%	1,03%	4,50%	5,34%	3,17%
Health and social welfare	2,44%	6,41%	6,21%	3,60%	2,93%	3,43%
Immigration	0,65%	0,15%	0,78%	0,00%	0,72%	1,34%
Military and defense	0,00%	0,29%	0,00%	0,23%	0,13%	0,17%
Religion	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0,23%	0,33%	0,00%
Science and technology	0,06%	0,73%	0,13%	0,23%	0,26%	0,50%
War and conflicts	0,00%	1,46%	0,00%	1,35%	0,20%	0,33%
World events	0,24%	0,00%	0,13%	0,23%	0,85%	0,17%
National events and heritage	1,31%	1,17%	1,42%	1,80%	0,59%	1,75%
Infrastructure	0,12%	0,00%	2,33%	0,00%	0,13%	3,68%
Campaign and party affairs	59,13%	51,46%	41,27%	76,58%	41,82%	38,85%
Norms and values	3,87%	0,87%	3,62%	1,58%	5,15%	2,09%
Nationalism	0,24%	1,60%	0,00%	4,73%	0,39%	3,76%
Corruption	3,69%	0,00%	1,16%	0,45%	3,58%	4,43%
Other	6,72%	1,90%	2,85%	1,58%	5,02%	4,93%