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Disinformation in the Spanish public debate: an analysis of political speeches in the Congress of Deputies

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Disinformation is one of the main challenges faced by modern democratic societies, becoming a crucial focus of study in political communication. Terms such as lie, falsehood, hoax, disinformation, or post-truth have become part of the daily language of the media, featured in numerous scientific studies, and entered political discourse. With the aim of delving into and determining the characteristic features of Spanish politicians' discourse on disinformation, a methodology of quantitative and qualitative content analysis is applied to a total of 1,115 interventions by members of the Congress of Deputies during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain. This period is chosen due to its high levels of disinformation and polarization. The results indicate that the issue of disinformation is a minor topic on the Spanish political agenda. Furthermore, metrics confirm a much higher use of terms such as lie, false, and hoax, to the detriment of other words like disinformation or post-truth. An impact of the pandemic on the main themes related to this phenomenon is also detected, with health and the economy being the primary frames identified. From an interpretative perspective, this is attributed to the tendency of Spanish politicians to use this issue as just one element within a polarizing and confrontational rhetoric, generally eschewing proactive debates on the measures needed to address disinformation.

KEYWORDS

political communication, political discourse, disinformation, lie, falsehood, Spain, Congress of Deputies

1 Introduction

One of the main challenges facing contemporary Western democratic societies is disinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). The relationship between information quality, informed citizenship, and democracy is evident (Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022), as quality information is necessary for a democracy. Moreover, when these are linked to traumatic events such as COVID-19 and the infodemic it generated (García-Marín, 2020; Pérez-Dasilva et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020), the war in Ukraine (Garcia-Marin and Salvat Martinrey, 2021), or the emergence of Artificial Intelligence and the development of new technologies (López Borrull et al., 2018). However, informational quality is crucial for the ongoing functioning of democratic institutions. Especially considering the continuous assault it faces due to the advancement of political polarization, which seeks to mobilize the electorate (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023). Hence, there is a growing concern about the

influence of propaganda and misinformation in the political landscape (Doroshenko and Lukito, 2021; García-Marín and Salvat-Martinrey, 2023). On the other hand, the issue of disinformation is also wielded as a political weapon, further exacerbating the problem (Rodríguez Pérez, 2019). This underscores the need to delve into the role of rhetoric and political communication in shaping discourses and, more broadly, in contemporary democracy (Jiménez Sánchez, 2020; Bakker et al., 2021; Montiel et al., 2021).

Disinformation poses a serious challenge to modern democracies (Shao et al., 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019): it undermines institutional trust and, overall, the quality of democracy. Consequently, there has been a growing societal (Anderson, 2021) and governmental concern in recent years about post-truth, fake news, and their impact on public opinion. The rise of disinformation erodes trust in the media, leading to a breakdown in democratic life as citizens seek alternatives (prompting political leaders to resort to different strategies, often involving simplification and emotional appeal) (Pérez-Curiel and Domínguez-García, 2021). For these reasons, various international organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, are concerned with the issue of disinformation, freedom, and the quality of the media (Tewksbury et al., 2000; Igartua et al., 2005; McCombs, 2005; Soroka et al., 2012; Muñiz, 2020) to combat disinformation within their communities (Rúas-Araujo et al., 2022).

However, prior to the influence of the media and their decisions and editorial stance (Carlson, 2017), political misinformation within the parliamentary sphere gains particular relevance (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Freelon and Wells, 2020). This work focuses precisely on a topic often overlooked in favor of discussions on the viral spread of online hoaxes (Anastasiadou et al., 2021; García-Orosa, 2022) or political leaders and their falsehoods (Boulianne et al., 2020; Froehlich, 2020; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020). Therefore, it centers on understanding the impact of disinformation on European public institutions and within the regional context, in contrast to more common studies on the media and their efforts to combat disinformation (such as fact-checking agencies) (Anspach and Carlson, 2020; Walter et al., 2020).

In a social context marked by fear of the virus (Coelho et al., 2020), polarization (Kerr et al., 2021), and disenchantment with institutions (Schulte-Cloos and Leininger, 2022), the main objective of this study is to investigate, using content analysis methodology, the discourse of Spanish politicians regarding disinformation.

From this approach, the following research questions arise:

RQ1 - What are the main words associated with "disinformation" that are part of Spanish political discourse?
RQ2 - What themes and rhetorical strategies do Spanish politicians use to address lies in their parliamentary interventions?
RQ3 - Does the ideological position of leaders, governments, and parties influence the use of disinformation as a hallmark of their political narrative?

2 From disinformation to political lies within public institutions: Spain

In Spain, in 2023, we have observed a series of manipulated and fake news, along with a considerable number of mutual accusations between the government and the opposition regarding the use of fake news or the spread of hoaxes and lies. Additionally, there are intentional pieces of information where opponents are exaggerated, simplified, ridiculed, and fear and confusion are generated, destabilizing the system among the population. In January 2020, just before the COVID-19 epidemic, the leader of the opposition, the president of the PP, Pablo Casado, stated that Pedro Sánchez was a "fake president" (Eldiario, 4/1/2020). An accusation that, from that moment on, has been bouncing around among different parties in Spain, amplified by the pandemic. These terms are still in use today: after the general elections of 2023, the new president of the People's Party, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, underwent a "fake investiture," as defined by Pedro Sánchez (El Español, 22/08/2023 and La Voz de Galicia, 2023), leader of the PSOE and later the president of the government, as he could not form a government against him. Nevertheless, he presented himself for the investiture session, already lost, to expose -in his opinion- Pedro Sánchez's falsehoods once again labeling him as "fake" and accusing him of spreading "fake news" (Europa Press, 27/04/2023).

It is not surprising, therefore, the significant loss of trust among Spaniards in their political institutions. In the case of Spain, the CIS (Center for Sociological Research) shows in its latest Barometers (2019, 2020) that more than half of the respondents express dissatisfaction with the work of the Congress of Deputies, and almost one-third state that the national Parliament pays too much attention to issues of little importance to the public. Within the Parliament, accusations among politicians of deceiving the public have become recurrent, albeit without verifying any information, solely as a rhetorical strategy that promotes polarization.

There are some parliamentary fact-checking efforts in Spain, for example in the Parliament of Galicia, where questions and oral responses in plenary sessions by the President of the Xunta de Galicia and opposition spokespeople have been analyzed (López López et al., 2017). These efforts show a certain degree of accuracy and truthfulness (65%) in the data presented in their interventions. It is also noted that parliamentarians do not cite sources, and the transparency and accessibility of the provided data are relative. The use of data appears rhetorical, without assigning greater importance or encouraging public debate and discussion. This is evident when examining social media, especially Twitter, as the most political: disinformation, fake news, and hoaxes abound (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020).

In Spain, especially following the self-proclaimed independence referendum on October 1, 2017, terms like post-truth, fake news, and others have become projectiles in public and political discourse, even within institutions (Pérez Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2018; Aparici et al., 2019; Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales, 2019; Elías, 2020; Mottola, 2020; Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020). On December 18, 2017, just a few days before the Real Academia Española (RAE) launched its new edition with the most

significant new terms, the then Vice President of the Spanish Government, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, stated in the Senate that the Catalan process had been 'a full-blown fake, a process based on post-truth, where falsehoods not only circulated on the Internet but also in official cars' (Coromina and Padilla, 2018; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019).

This rise in Spain and among its various political representatives regarding the issue of disinformation, post-truth, and fake phenomena cannot be separated from the international context (Ahmadian et al., 2017; Rúas Araújo et al., 2018). Thus, in Spain, as in other countries like Trump's United States (Jamieson and Taussig, 2017; Guess et al., 2018), politicians accuse each other of manufacturing post-truths in the form of fake news because it encourages polarization and political mobilization (these are rhetorical strategies). However, it's not just the international influence but also the transformation of the Spanish political landscape in 2015. For the first time in the history of Spanish democracy, the bipartisanship model was broken in the media, and there were four parties (PSOE, PP, Podemos, and Ciudadanos) with the potential to gain significant representation in the Congress of Deputies (Ruiz-del-Olmo and Bustos-Díaz, 2016; Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2020).

At present, although the political landscape has once again changed, especially marked by the growth of a far-right party, Vox, in response to the Catalan independence political challenge (and also to the alliance of the PSOE, along with Catalan parties, with EH Bildu, a Basque independence party), polarization remains significant. The Spanish parliament is conditioned by regional minorities and by two major blocs (left-right) that seek polarization and leverage disinformation and falsehoods (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; Velasco-Molpeceres et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a complex social climate marked by the Catalan conflict, the role of Vox and its far-right alliance with the PP (for example, in Castilla y León), and social division, which, in turn, stems from the COVID-19 pandemic and pre-existing tensions.

Disinformation is a powerful weapon. Disinformation is considered false information, deliberately created and made public to shape public opinion, cause harm, confuse, and distort (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022; Paniagua Rojano and Rúas Araujo, 2023). Thus, disinformation is associated with terms like lie, fake news, false, fake, hoax, or post-truth (a term that was pointed out by the Oxford Dictionary as the word of the year in late 2016) (Garcia-Marin and Salvat Martinrey, 2021). The term 'post-truth' was coined during the Gulf War and started being used from 1992 by the media, and it cannot be separated from politics (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019). Its resurgence from 2016 is also inseparable from politics: from the American elections and Donald Trump to Brexit or the events of October 1st in Catalonia (Spain).

But it's not just the concept of post-truth: its ubiquity has led to the emergence of a variety of terms to try to identify these manipulations and falsehoods that make up the world of post-truth (Keyes, 2004). Despite their differences, they function as equivalents and often form a whole that simply has to do with disinformation. Thus, lies, falsehoods, and the term "hoax" ("desinformación," "bulo," "mentira," "falso," "fake," and "posverdad" in Spanish) are wielded in public debate, regardless of their relationship with the truth, as tools of disinformation and post-truth. All these terms, some more frequently used than others, are recurrent in institutions, without implying a concern for the truth. For example, there has been much talk of fake news since the electoral campaign of the 2016 United States presidential elections (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). According to Rochlin (2017), these false news stories can be defined as deliberately false stories published on a website that wants to appear as a real news site. But it can also be false or manipulated information that is simply spread due to various issues or particular interests.

According to OpenSources.com (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020), fake news, falsehoods, hoaxes, lies, etc. can be triggered by various reasons:

1) The use of sources that employ humor and false information but are not cited in their satirical context.
2) Extreme bias from sources that provide information supported by propaganda, decontextualization, and the presentation of opinions as facts.
3) Promotion of conspiracy theories, as some sources endorse conspiracy against their adversaries.
4) The spread of rumors, hoaxes, and insinuations as facts without acknowledging that they are rumors or unverified information.
5) Dissemination of "State news" or propaganda from repressive and dictatorial states that present themselves as high-quality sources.
6) Promotion of pseudoscience with sources making scientifically dubious claims.
7) "Hate news," employing sources that promote discrimination.
8) Use of "clickbait" by using or citing sources that propagate credible content but use exaggerated and misleading headlines based on text and images from social media.
9) Citing sources that require subsequent verification (even indicating this).
10) Using political sources that provide manipulated information, typically verifiable, in support of certain points of view or political orientations.

However, disinformation not only affects the contents that are spread but also extends to decontextualization, the use of technology to falsify, or even the straightforward use of lies. The shadow of disinformation (beyond its various versions and names) is also powerful. Hence, its rhetorical use (accusations of lying, falsifying, misinforming, manipulating, etc.) is crucial in politics and communication, as suggested by classical studies. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) note that rhetoric can activate deeper thinking processes, leading to more lasting opinion changes. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) add that effective rhetoric can strengthen perceived credibility, influencing message acceptance, and Zaller (1992) insists that rhetoric affects mobilization and participation, potentially encouraging it. McCombs and Shaw (1972) propose that language is key to constructing political and media agendas, as rhetoric can shape public perception of issues by highlighting certain problems and diverting attention from others (as specified by framing theories: Entman, 1993; Sunstein, 2002; Soroka et al., 2012 and Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) emphasize that rhetoric

TABLE 1 Correspondence between research questions and methods.

Research questions (RQ)	Indicators
(RQ1) What are the main words associated with disinformation in the Spanish political discourse?	Keyword, origin, concept, and relevance
(RQ2) What themes and rhetorical strategies do Spanish politicians use to address lies in their parliamentary interventions?	Issue frame (themes)/Game frame (strategies)
(RQ3) Does the ideological position of leaders, governments, and parties influence the use of disinformation as part of their political narrative?	Leader and political party

can contribute to consensus-building or, conversely, polarization. Group polarization theory suggests that discussion and effective argument presentation can lead to either stronger consensus or more extreme polarization, depending on how messages are articulated (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2022). Ultimately, rhetoric is essential in politics and communication because it affects fundamental aspects of the functioning of democratic society, as confirmed by various studies (McCroskey and Teven, 1999; Mutz, 2002; Jamieson and Waldman, 2003; Petty and Briñol, 2015).

It is important to note that research in rhetoric, persuasion, and political communication is a highly dynamic field. Rhetoric and politics are closely interconnected and play a crucial role in the contemporary political landscape, especially in the context of polarization as they impact audience segmentation and echo chambers (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Stroud, 2011; Levendusky, 2013). Furthermore, with social media, which encourages message virality, the importance of rhetoric is crucial (Sunstein, 2017). Polarized language tends to receive more attention and engagement (Barber et al., 2015; Guess et al., 2019). The virality of polarized messages can contribute to the creation of information bubbles and the amplification of polarization (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010). Thus, language is a primary instrument and often contributes to the delegitimization of others, leading to the common use of derogatory terms to describe those with different political opinions (Jost and Amodio, 2012).

However, beyond rhetorical strategies and their success or suitability for mobilizing society, there is disinformation (Pennycook et al., 2020). Disinformation and political polarization are interconnected through rhetorical strategies that exploit cognitive and emotional biases (Guess et al., 2020; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022). Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for developing effective strategies that counter disinformation and promote a more informed and constructive dialogue, contributing to this work (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

As Journell (2017) points out, since the Trump campaign in 2016, a new mental framework has emerged, based on linking the idea of "fake" to information that contradicts one's own ideology. In this context, truth becomes an ideological, subjective value within partisan logic (Roozenbeek and van der Linden, 2019). Therefore, this work examines the rhetorical strategies used by politicians to persuade and manipulate (creation of emotional narratives, the use of sensational language, and the exploitation of cognitive biases, etc.). In disinformation, rhetoric seeks not only to convey false information but also to influence the attitudes and beliefs of the audience (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

3 Materials and methods

In order to delve into the discourse of Spanish politicians on disinformation, a methodology of content analysis was applied, of a quantitative-qualitative (Krippendorff, 2012; Silverman, 2016) and discursive nature (Van Dijk, 2015; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2017), complemented by the issue frame/game frame theory (Cartwright et al., 2019). For the research, the decision was made to analyze the speeches made in the plenary sessions of the Congress of Deputies. In this regard, a search was conducted in the Official Journal for all interventions that took place in the Chamber's Plenary and that contain the keywords "disinformation," "hoax," "lie," "false," "fake," and "post-truth" ("desinformación", "bulo", "mentira", "falso", "fake" and "posverdad"). However, to shape the research corpus, expressions of deputies who were not in the use of the floor but were recorded in the official bulletin are discarded.

The studied time period was established from the first known case of COVID-19 infection in Spain (31/01/2020) and extended for a whole year (31/01/2021). This choice was due to numerous studies confirming that the pandemic led to an exponential increase in disinformation and forced governments to take measures to address the so-called infodemic (Pérez-Dasilva et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2023). The sample universe consists of 1115 interventions that Spanish politicians made in the 65 plenary sessions that took place over a year.

To carried out this study, a coding manual was designed, consisting of 9 variables and structured into three main blocks: concepts (keywords, origin, and specification), issue frame/game frame (topic and strategies), and subject (leader, political party, and relevance). Each of these methodological strategies corresponded to one of the research questions (see Table 1). In regard to the strategies studied, these are classified into three categories: confrontational (the politician seeks to attack his opponent using terms related to disinformation), ideological (refers to this phenomenon as support to spread his way of understanding politics) or propositional (analyzes the problem of disinformation and proposes initiatives to combat it). For the study of the thematic agenda (1) and discursive strategies (2), the general sample ($n = 1,115$) was subjected to a prior random sampling based on 50 tweets to determine the main categories. The coding process was carried out manually, and the obtained data were subsequently processed using the statistical analysis program IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29).

4 Results

The results obtained in this research provide an insight into the discourse of Spanish politicians regarding disinformation. As analyzed earlier, this phenomenon is one of the main challenges faced by modern societies, and political leaders are theoretically expected to lead the fight against systematic manipulation campaigns. Thanks to the achieved results, it is possible to quantitatively determine the importance that Spanish politicians

FIGURE 1
Total number of expressions by plenary session.
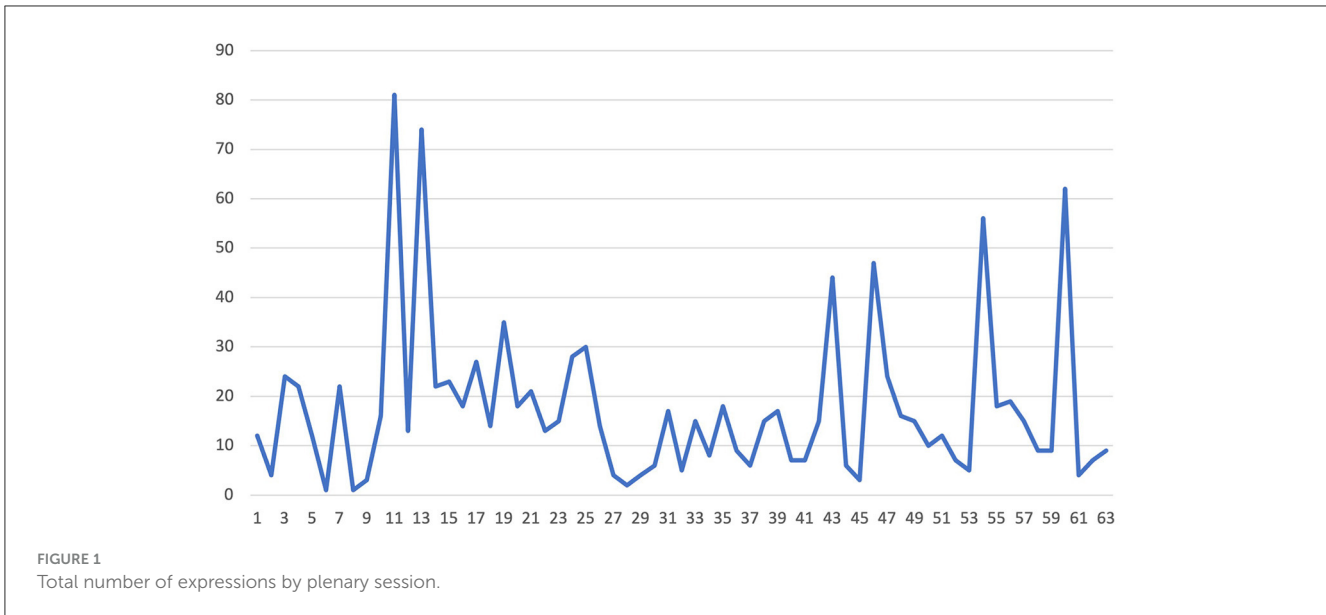
attribute to these issues within their narratives. The fact that only 1,115 references to this phenomenon were found during the 65 plenary sessions held by the Spanish Congress of Deputies over a year, averaging slightly over 17 per session, initially suggests that disinformation plays a secondary role in the country's political agenda.

However, the study of disaggregated data for each plenary session demonstrates significant divergences in the use of these terms. As shown in Figure 1, while there are plenary sessions in which almost no reference is made to disinformation or falsehood, in others, these terms are used more than 80 times. Thus, the sessions in which terms like disinformation, falsehood, or lie are most frequently used coincide with issues more prone to polarization or, at least, conflict. In this sense, these are the sessions in which the first (4/9) and second extension (4/22) of the initial state of alarm due to the COVID-19 pandemic were debated, as well as another appearance by the President of the Government during the second state of alarm (12/16). Other noteworthy sessions include those in which Vox presented a vote of no confidence (10/21) and a proposal by the same party against a government initiative to address disinformation (11/18).

As can be observed in Figure 2, the study of keywords used by Spanish politicians also provides relevant results. The metrics indicate that terms like "disinformation" (5.6%) and "post-truth" (0.6%), ostensibly used to describe this complex phenomenon, have very limited importance. In quantitative terms, only 69 expressions have been located over a year, practically meaning one mention per session. On the contrary, Spanish politicians prefer to use words like "lie" (45.2%) or "false" (32.6%), theoretically employed to describe a specific fact. In line with this, to a lesser extent, they also tend to use the concept of "hoax" (11.2%) or the English term "fake" (4.8%).

To confirm this, it is examined whether these expressions refer to abstract issues or concrete facts (Figure 3), and it is confirmed that Spanish deputies understand disinformation (88.7%) and especially post-truth (100%) as concepts referring to

FIGURE 2
Frequency of keyword.
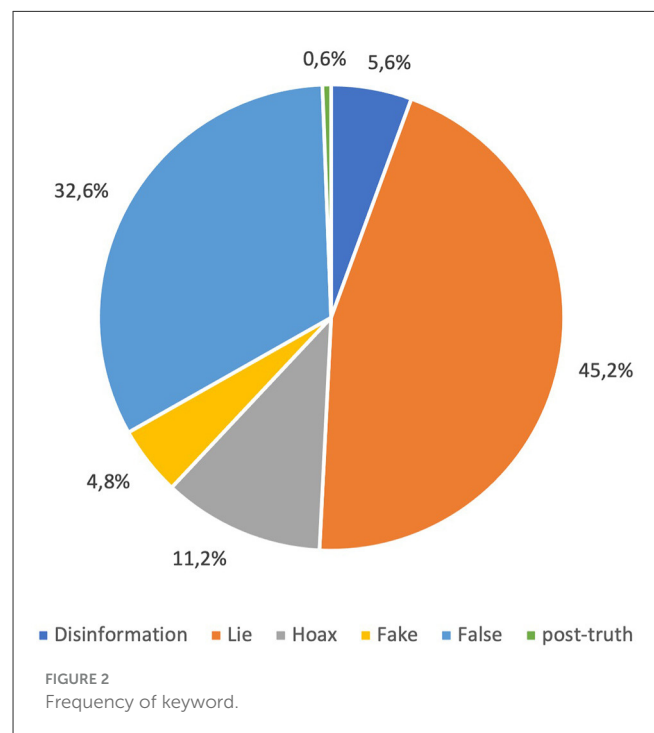
global phenomena. Meanwhile, they use words like "false" (95%), the English term "fake" (94.4%), "hoax" (92.8%), and "lie" (92.7%) to qualify specific facts or statements.

In line with these results, the metrics confirm (Figure 4) that the terms "post-truth" (83.7%) and "disinformation" (53.2%) are used by politicians to describe a general view of society, while "lie" (90.7%), "hoax" (84%), "false" (79.9%), and "fake" (77.8%) link it to statements or data used by other political or institutional leaders. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the media and social networks have a limited impact on the discourse of Spanish political leaders related to the disinformation phenomenon.

FIGURE 3
Perspective for each keyword.
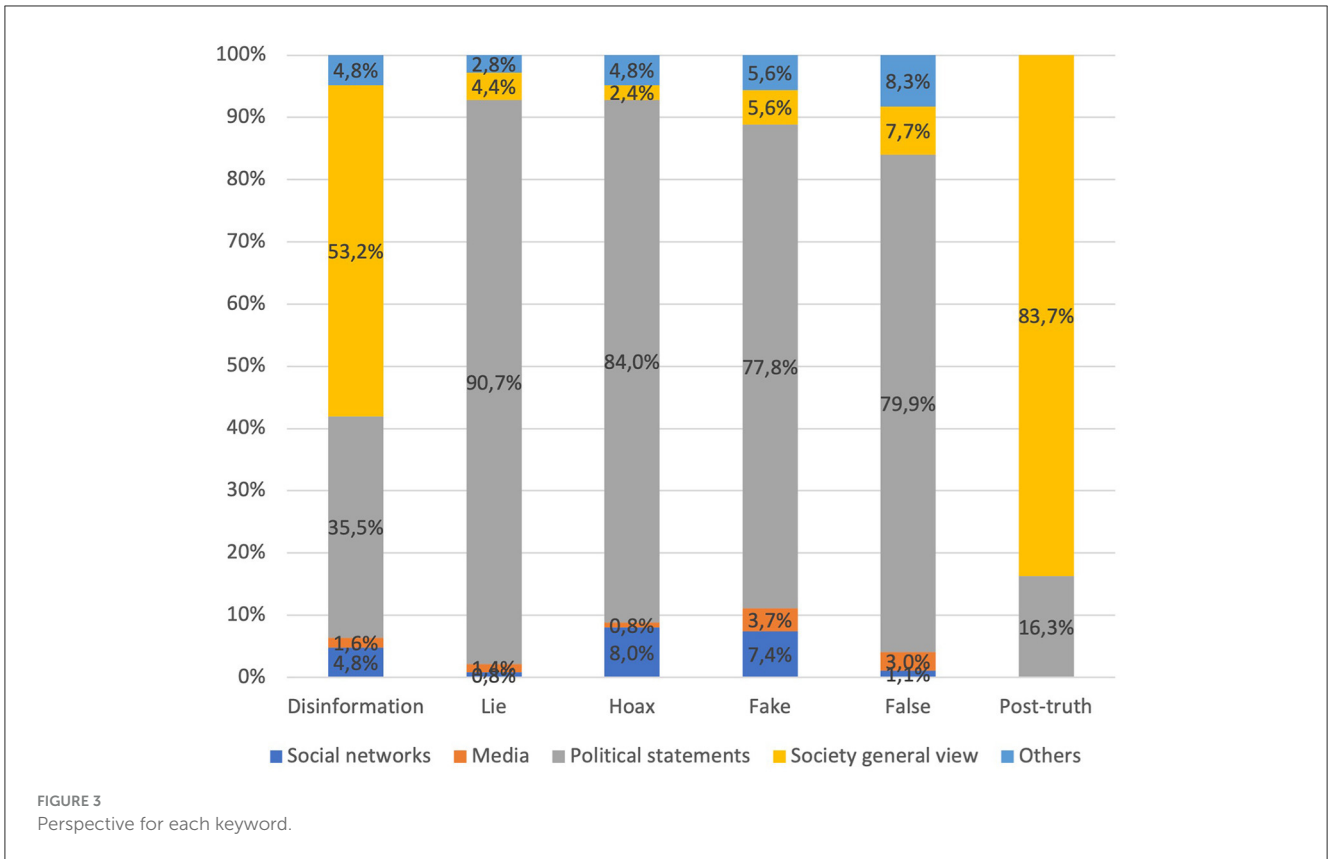
Regarding the importance of these expressions in the Spanish political narrative, the overall figures indicate that it is a matter clearly addressed tangentially (67.5%) within interventions focused on other political issues. Thus, occasions where this phenomenon is dealt with secondarily (24.6%) or primarily (7.9%) are limited. However, it is also observed that Spanish politicians assign different relevance to each of the studied terms. For example, the concept of disinformation usually influences the discourse in which it is inserted either primarily (45.2%) or secondarily (41.9%). On the other hand, terms like post-truth (57.1%) or hoax (50.4%) tend to affect the narrative secondarily. In contrast, other words like false (81.3%), lie (73%), or fake (72.2%) are used by deputies occasionally and only tangentially affect their interventions.

4.1 Issues and strategies used by Spanish politicians

The study of the thematic agenda allows determining the topics with which Spanish politicians associate the phenomenon of disinformation and lies. As seen in Figure 5, one of the most striking results is that the majority of interventions referencing lies or disinformation are not related to any specific topic (27.5%). In this regard, Spanish politicians tend to accuse other politicians of lying, distorting data, or promoting disinformation without specifying the subject. However, and in line with the context of the pandemic crisis, expressions related to health and COVID-19 (22.7%), the economy (10.8%), or security (7.4%) are also prevalent.

In addition to other minor themes (18.5%), issues such as equality and diversity (3.9%), the territorial structure of the country (3.3%), education (3%), immigration (1.5%), or science and environment (1.4%) are covered. Breaking down the data by keyword, the only trend to highlight is that most instances where the term "hoax" (42.4%) is used, it is related to COVID-19.

Regarding the rhetorical strategies or the intentionality with which Spanish political leaders use these terms, this research confirms a clear correlation between mentioning the disinformation phenomenon and polarization. In this sense, the vast majority of references are used by politicians with the aim of confrontation (84.9%), while a minority has ideological (7.7%) or propositional (4.6%) purposes. As observed in Figure 6, the confrontational character is clearly predominant in all studied terms, except for disinformation, where most interventions have a propositional character.

4.2 Influence of leadership and ideology

To determine if there is an influence of the ideology of political parties when addressing the phenomenon of disinformation and lies, it is advisable to consider the use that Spanish parliamentary forces make of the studied terms. In this way, opposition conservative parties, PP (25.6%) and Vox (23.1%), are the ones who use these terms the most, compared to the governing parties, PSOE (23.1%) and Unidas Podemos (11.9%), which do so to a lesser extent. However, it is important to note that the figures for the
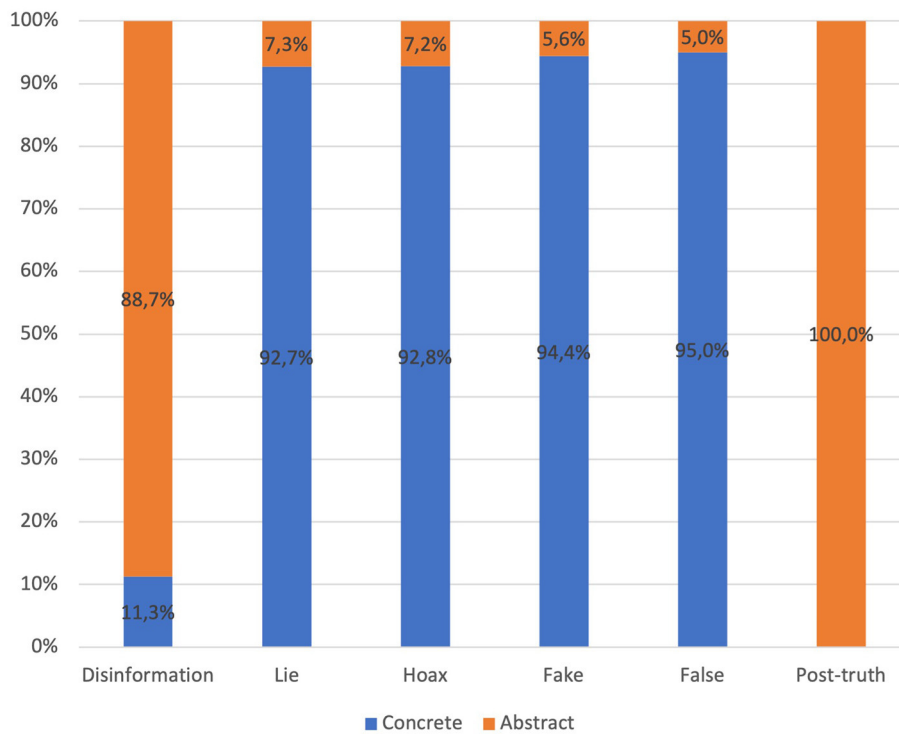
FIGURE 4
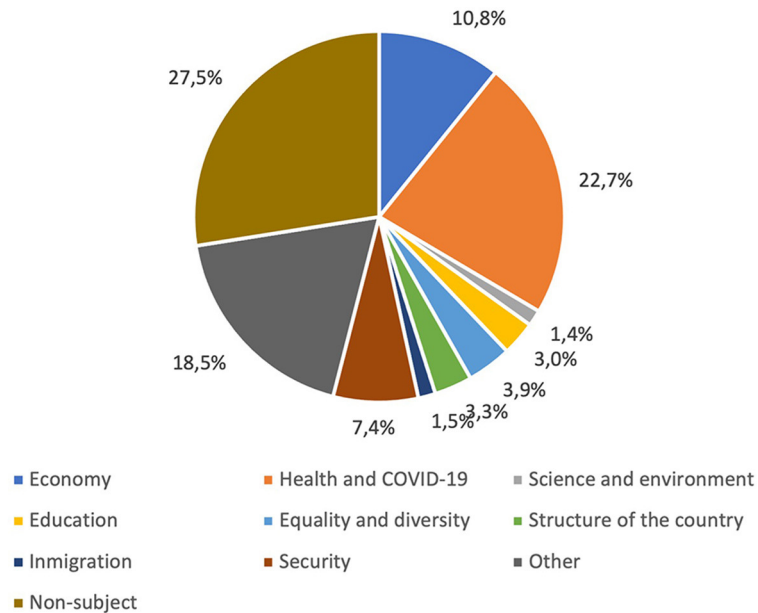Origin of disinformation for each keyword.

FIGURE 5
Most used issues.

latter include both interventions by their deputies and by members of the government belonging to their party. For example, in the case of the PSOE, 77% of its speeches are by government members, while only 33% are by deputies. To complete this scenario, it should be noted that the lower figures for minority parties, such as ERC (5.3%), Ciudadanos (4%), or PNV (1.7%), may be related to the shorter intervention time allowed by the rules of the Congress of Deputies.

FIGURE 6
Most used strategies.
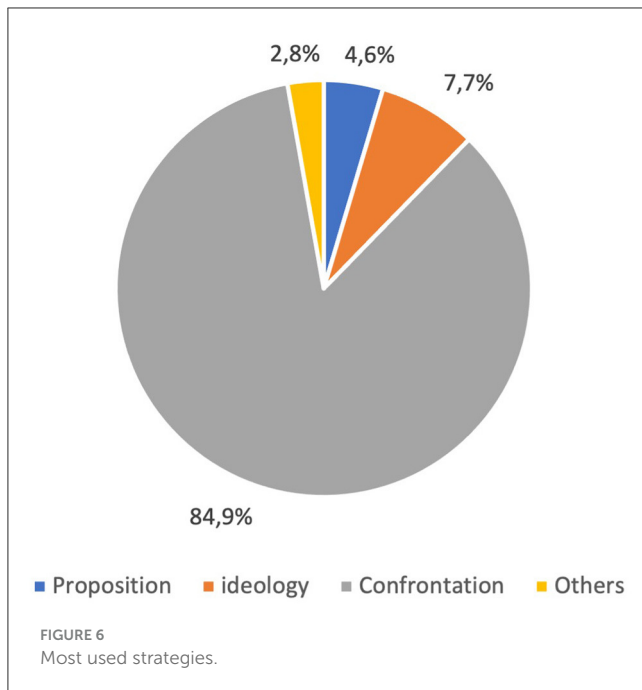
Beyond the fact that the data show a behavior with a tendency toward homogeneity among members of different parties, there is a predominant trend among PP (56.8%), Vox (51.3%), and Unidas Podemos (42.9%) politicians to use the term "lie," while PNV (52.6%), ERC (50.8%), and, to a lesser extent, PSOE (34.9%) opt for "false." In relation to the latter, the main party in the government is the one that most frequently uses the concept of disinformation, accounting for 58.1% of the total, and that ERC is the force that generally uses the concept of post-truth (42.9%). Regarding the theme, beyond the focus on health and the lack of definition, no major differences have been detected between political forces, except for a greater interest from Ciudadanos (22%) and ERC (22.2%) in linking disinformation to the territorial structure of the country.

Continuing to detect nuances in the strategy employed by political forces, the metrics suggest (see Figure 7) that nationalist political forces, PNV (47.4%) and ERC (32.3%), tend to use concepts such as disinformation or lies to spread their ideology. Although there is a clear majority that uses these terms to confront, it should be emphasized that PNV (26.3%) and PSOE (15.1%) are the parties that also use them propositionally. Furthermore, it is these parties that most frequently address the subject of study directly or secondarily. Thus, PNV addresses disinformation secondarily in 47.4% or directly in 10.5%, while PSOE does so secondarily in 27.5% or primarily in 19.4%. In contrast, the rest of the political forces have clear majorities of interventions in which they reduce the disinformation phenomenon to a tangential issue.

Regarding the speaker, the data indicate that it is deputies who most frequently use expressions related to disinformation (62.7%), a matter to which a high percentage of interventions by leaders of parliamentary forces (19.9%) should be added. On the contrary, the Government uses these terms on rare occasions (17.5%), with most coming from ministers (10.4% of the total), the president himself

(4.3%), or vice presidents (2.8%). Taking into account the influence of the speakers, it should be noted that in most cases (40.3%) when the term disinformation is used, it is ministers who do so. Another aspect where the influence of the speaker is observed is in the strategy, as practically members of the Government, ministers (24.1%), the president (10.4%), or vice presidents (9.7%), are the only ones who have a propositional character.

5 Discussion

The first year of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain provides an ideal context for the study of political communication, given the high levels of misinformation and polarization due to the health, economic, and social crisis the country is undergoing (García-Marín, 2020; Pérez-Dasilva et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2021; Montiel et al., 2021). Within this conflictive situation, it is confirmed that misinformation is not a relevant topic for Spanish politicians, who limit themselves to accusing each other of lying or falsifying data (Guess et al., 2018; Boulianne et al., 2020; Froehlich, 2020; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020).

From an interpretative perspective, the results obtained in this research highlight two innovative contributions. On the one hand, the analysis conducted indicates that misinformation as a phenomenon plays a secondary role in political discourse, contrasting sharply with the academic realm (Tewksbury et al., 2000; Igartua et al., 2005; McCombs, 2005; Soroka et al., 2012; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; Shao et al., 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019; García-Marín, 2020; Muñiz, 2020; Pérez-Dasilva et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020; Anderson, 2021; Doroshenko and Lukito, 2021; Pérez-Curiel and Domínguez-García, 2021; Rúas-Araujo et al., 2022; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022; García-Marín and Salvat-Martinrey, 2023). The fact that Spanish leaders choose to reduce lies to a rhetorical device to fuel polarization, and somewhat trivialize them, adds another dimension to the study of misinformation. This aligns with the phenomenon of the rise of political populism, associated with Trumpism (Jamieson and Taussig, 2017; Rúas Araújo et al., 2018; Boulianne et al., 2020; Froehlich, 2020; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020; Montiel et al., 2021; Pérez-Curiel and Domínguez-García, 2021) but also with various European nationalist movements such as Brexit, Scottish independence, or Catalan independence (Pérez Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2018; Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales, 2019; Mottola, 2020; Pérez-Curiel and Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020).

It is worth emphasizing that, despite the media's interest in legitimizing themselves as part of the fight against misinformation, the commitment of governments in different countries and supranational institutions (WHO, United Nations, European Union, etc.), this study highlights that combating misinformation is a secondary issue. Instead, misinformation and its tools (lies, hoaxes, fake news, etc.) are exploited as political mechanisms to mobilize voters, even within the Parliament (Tewksbury et al., 2000; Igartua et al., 2005; McCombs, 2005; Soroka et al., 2012; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017; Muñiz, 2020).

Furthermore, this analysis also identifies the dominant frames around the disinformation phenomenon. It is noteworthy that this research introduces the novelty that most references to

FIGURE 7
Main strategies by political parties.
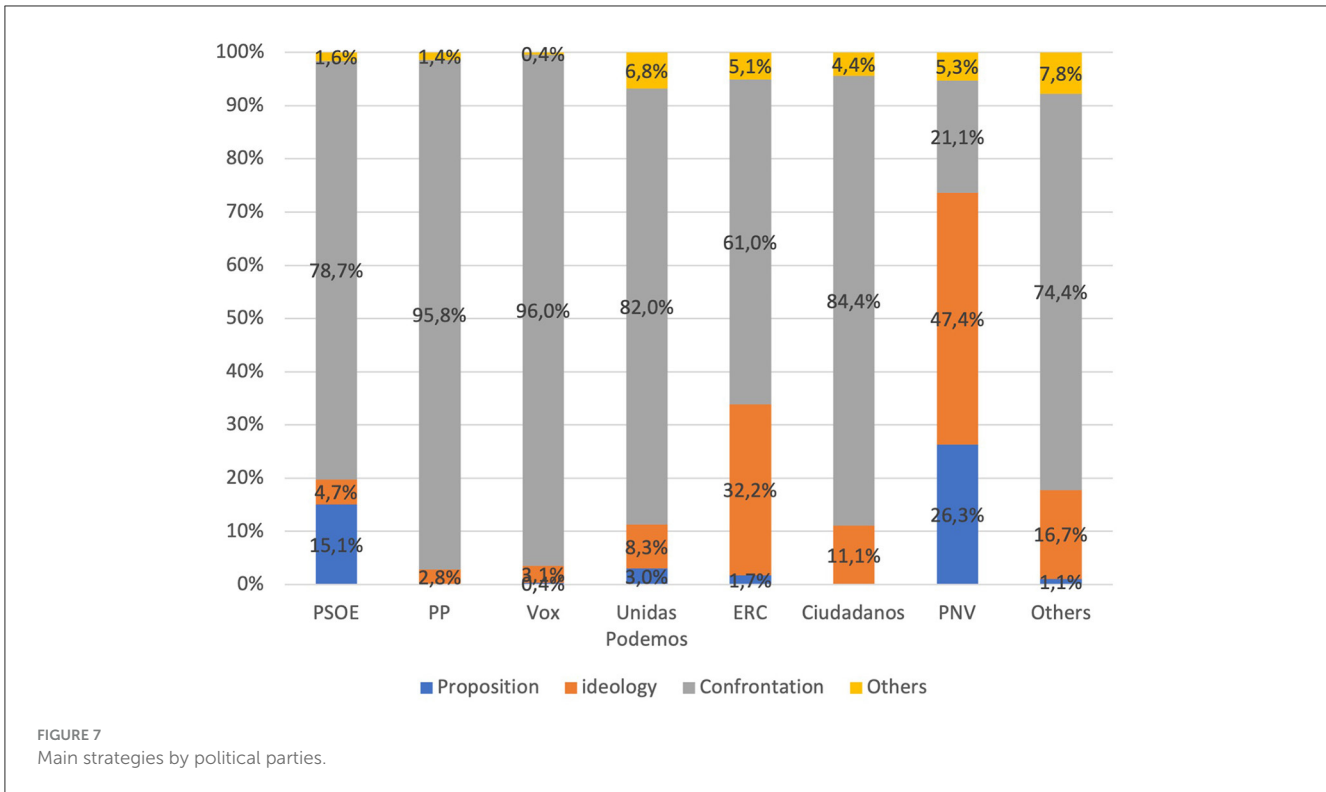
misinformation, falsehood, or lies are not related to a specific topic. Instead, they are generic accusations that politicians use to refute the discourse of their adversaries.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the existence of limitations stemming from this research, such as the fact that only 1 year has been studied, and that this period has been clearly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a historical moment in which political polarization was exacerbated, and political focus largely centered on health, economic, and social measures to address the virus. In this regard, it is advisable for future studies to broaden the focus of this research, for example, by examining the entire legislative term. This would help determine whether the residual role of combating disinformation is circumstantial or if it confirms that the phenomenon does not play a significant role in the Spanish political agenda. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to conduct comparative studies with other countries to see if the international political narrative on disinformation follows similar patterns to those observed in Spain.

It is also necessary to clarify that in the Spanish Congress of Deputies, unlike in others such as the United Kingdom, there are no rules preventing members from accusing others of lying. The only rules are outlined in the Congress Regulations, specifically in section 16, which states that members shall conform to the rules, observe parliamentary order, courtesy, and discipline, and refrain from disclosing proceedings that may, in exceptional circumstances, be of a secret nature. Additionally, in section 71, it is stated that during a debate, if allusions are made that, in the opinion of the Chair, involve value judgments or inaccuracies regarding a Member's person or conduct, the person referred to may be granted the floor for a period not exceeding 3 min. During this time, they may strictly reply to the references made without delving into the substance of the debated question. If the member exceeds this time allocation, the Speaker shall immediately withdraw their right to continue speaking. Allusions may only be responded to in the same sitting or the next. If the allusion affects the decorum or dignity of a parliamentary group, the Chair may grant the floor to a representative for the same time and under the same conditions as specified in paragraphs 1 and 2. It seems important, therefore, to address the issue of misinformation in political institutions in the future. However, it is also necessary to note that in Spain, there has been a cross-cultural adoption of the term "fake," dissociating it from "fake news" and misinformation. Thus, it is crucial to differentiate between accusations by Spanish politicians for holding different points of view and, on the other hand, deliberate actions to promote misinformation, as the latter does not seem to be the case.

An especially interesting area for analysis would be disinformation in the political agenda of the European Parliament. In 2018, the European Commission established a code of practice on disinformation: an innovative self-regulatory tool to ensure greater transparency and accountability of online platforms, and a framework to monitor and improve online platforms' policies on disinformation. Also, it was arranged an Action Plan against disinformation that sets the framework of the EU's actions by improving detection and analysis capabilities, raising awareness, strengthening societal resilience, increasing coordinated responses, and mobilizing online platforms and the advertising sector. In June 2020, the European Commission tried to tackling COVID-19 disinformation and launched of the COVID-19 disinformation monitoring programme: a transparency measure to ensure accountability toward the public of the efforts made by the Code's signatories to limit online disinformation related to COVID-19. And, finally, in 2021, they launched of the European Digital Media

Observatory national hubs to increase the capacity of detecting, analyzing and exposing disinformation campaigns, and a legislative proposal on the transparency and targeting of political advertising.

Also, for future studies, it would be interesting to examine the impact of this issue on social media. Additionally, with the development of Artificial Intelligence in 2023 and its widespread availability, we believe it would be intriguing to explore the connection between political discourse and the role of rhetoric, disinformation, and falsehood with artificial intelligence.

6 Conclusions

In response to RQ1, it has been observed that the key words used by politicians regarding this phenomenon are lie, false, and hoax, while misinformation is used infrequently, and post-truth is practically unused. However, nuances have been identified among these terms that explain the clearly predominant trend of using the former. Consistent with previous studies (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; Guess et al., 2018; Velasco-Molpeceres et al., 2022), lies, falsehood, or hoaxes are associated with statements or data used by other politicians, while misinformation is linked to the phenomenon of systematic manipulation or the social context. In this sense, it can be concluded that Spanish politicians do not intend to address the problem but simply aim to attack their opponents. This assertion is reinforced by the fact that the sessions in which these terms are most frequently used are those in which political confrontation is higher, such as when restrictive measures against the pandemic are approved or a vote of no confidence is debated.

Thus, in response to RQ2, it has been identified that the strategy of Spanish politicians regarding misinformation is clearly related to confrontation, far ahead of ideology or proposal. In this regard, it is striking that only 51 out of the 1,115 speeches studied aim to propose measures to combat the disinformation phenomenon. Along these lines, it is also confirmed that, beyond health or economic issues related to the pandemic, most references do not have a specific theme. Despite being a thoroughly studied academic subject and analyzed in the media, Spanish politicians did not engage in an in-depth debate addressing the causes, consequences, and measures to be implemented to address this problem. This fact is more striking when considering the context of infodemic resulting from COVID-19 in the studied year (García-Marín, 2020; Pérez-Dasilva et al., 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020; Anderson, 2021; Montiel et al., 2021).

In relation to RQ3, this research allows us to determine that conservatives are the ones who make more references to the studied terms, ahead of progressives and nationalists (Journell, 2017; Pérez-Curiel and Domínguez-García, 2021; Schulte-Cloos and Leininger, 2022; Velasco-Molpeceres et al., 2022). Regarding the words used, PP, Vox, and UP choose to use the term lie, while PNV, ERC, and PSOE prefer falsehood. Contrary to the accusation of lying, which prevails in political discourse as a tool of polarization and confrontation, the term falsehood or false may carry a connotation that seems less severe, although it does not lose its significance within the vocabulary of disinformation.

In line with this, contrary to the predominant trend of confrontation and polarization, there is also a strategy by ERC and PNV to use these terms to reinforce their ideological messages, and to a lesser extent, by PSOE and PNV to propose measures against disinformation. This makes them the only ones addressing the topic directly or indirectly. Another finding of this research is that it is generally the ministers who use the term disinformation, and practically only members of the government who take a proactive stance. This position differs from the strategy of opposition leaders and parties who opt for the term lie to amplify accusations against the government and its management.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

RD-G: Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft. AV-M: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. CP-C: Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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