

Propaganda in social networks: Twitter content analysis during the Andalusian electoral campaign

***Propaganda en redes sociales: Análisis de contenido
en Twitter durante la campaña electoral andaluza***

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ARTICLE



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Abstract

The communicative phenomenon of propaganda is present in all time periods. However, it acquires greater relevance in electoral campaigns. This work aims to show what type of digital propaganda campaign has been most appealed by the political parties that ran for the Andalusian Parliament (Spain) in 2018. With this objective, a content analysis has been applied to the official Twitter accounts of each organization. Finally, literature on the political effects of propaganda were reviewed for the discussion of the obtained data. These results have confirmed the scientific evidence: the party that has mostly used a negative campaign has been the most affected at the elections.

Keywords

Politics, Propaganda, Elections, Social media, Twitter, Communication.

Resumen

El fenómeno comunicativo de la propaganda se encuentra presente en todo periodo temporal; no obstante, es en las campañas electorales donde adquiere una mayor relevancia. Este trabajo pretende poner de manifiesto qué tipología de campaña propagandística digital ha sido más recurrida por los partidos políticos que optaron al Parlamento Andaluz (España) en 2018. Con este objetivo, se ha aplicado un análisis de contenido en las cuentas oficiales de cada organización en Twitter. Por último, para la discusión de los datos se ha revisado literatura sobre los efectos políticos

de la propaganda. Estos resultados han confirmado las evidencias científicas: el partido que más ha utilizado una campaña negativa ha sido el más perjudicado en las urnas.

Palabras clave

Política, Propaganda, Elecciones, Redes sociales, Twitter, Comunicación.

1. INTRODUCTION

The act of voting represents one of the most important means for the political participation of the majority of citizens from democratic countries. Aware of the importance of this period, the political parties use all the tools available to get supporters for their cause in the days before the vote, one of these instruments being the mass media. However, it should be noted that voting training does not begin exclusively in the electoral period or by the mass media (García Beaudoux, Dádamo and Slavinsky, 2006). In this sense, the pioneering work of the opinion leader of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1960) stated that people decide their vote for the primary group rather than for the media. Even the maximum referents of the stage of limited effects did not downplay the outcomes that they could have. As they expressed, the fact that the media materialized the latent vote or reinforced the previous attitudes was already an important effect (1960).

The importance of this electoral period means that both the examination of electoral campaigns and the analysis of political effects have been a fertile ground for the field of research in terms of communication. Along these lines, questions have been raised about the greater or lesser effectiveness of the positive, negative (Lau and Pomper, 2001, p. 73) and propaganda messages of the political parties. This discussion has not been free of controversy. Starting from this debate, this research provides a theo-

retical-empirical approach to that discussion by examining the type of propaganda campaign that each political party that obtained parliamentary representation in the 2018 Andalusian elections has used. For this purpose, a content analysis has been carried out during the election campaign on the social network Twitter. In turn, the results obtained will be contrasted with theories of political effects in order to deepen the understanding of the data. Although the nature of the study does not allow correlations to be established, the support in previous research on the theory of the effects of electoral campaigns will make it possible to reflect on the strategy used by each party.

It should be noted that the choice of this temporal and geographical period is relevant as it was in these regional elections when the ultra-right party, VOX, managed to enter the Spanish institutions with force. Therefore, it is of special interest to determine the political strategies of each political party that achieved representation in the Andalusian Parliament and analyze their achievements and communication failures.

1.1. ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

To understand the basis of electoral campaigns and their role in society in political terms, it is necessary to theoretically establish their most significant points. According to Gronbeck (1978) and Norris (1999), this political period has among its objectives to obtaining success

in the battle of ideas, convert opponents, mobilize supporters and provide them information and discussion topics. From a sociological point of view, these purposes are linked to the definition of propaganda provided by Young (1991), who says that it is “the deliberate use of symbols with the purpose of changing people’s beliefs, ideas and ultimately their acts as a form of power and social control” (p. 109). The communicative phenomenon of propaganda receives the electoral campaign to help issuers achieve their objectives: persuade the electorate through different communication techniques. As Domenach (2001) stated, “propaganda is polymorphic and takes many forms” (p. 21).

Digital communication is one of these variants. As Vergeer (2012, p. 9) points out, it is increasingly gaining strength among political parties and candidates to inform, communicate and connect with large segments of the population. This boom in digital propaganda communication has led to an intense debate in the literature about the mediatization of politics, since digital media seem to question the rules of conventional media in the public sphere (Lobera and Sampedro, 2018, p. 555). Along these lines, social networks appear to break the traditional unidirectional propaganda communication (Holtz-Bacha, 2017). However, recent empirical work on the interactivity of political leader accounts breaks that image: using a platform that allows users to interact does not mean they do. Moreover, the fact is that no political office usually “likes”, comment or retweet messages from the common population. (Olof Larsson and Moe, 2010; Gibson, Lusoli, Ward, 2008; Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers, 2010). According to Ross and Burger (2014, p. 60), this democratizing appearance of social networks is not confirmed by most studies that, in general, show the unidirectional flow of communication

and the lack of interest of politicians to actively engage with the public.

All this causes that the digital electoral campaigns have the elements of the traditional propaganda: a collage of messages sent through the television, fragments of the debates and appearances of the main political parties. In the Spanish political sphere, the parties do not seem to take advantage of the conversation possibilities offered by *Twitter*. On the contrary, they are excessively oriented towards the classical vision of traditional media, focused on unidirectional communication and broadcasting (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez y Pineda, 2018, p. 132). Therefore, the fact that social networks serve to promote traditional messages makes studying the platform appropriate to determine the propaganda strategy used by each political party.

1.2. EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

Electoral campaigns pursue the mobilization of supporters and the conversion of opponents (Gronbeck, 1978; Norris, 1999), knowing if these objectives have been met is one of the biggest questions that opens after the elections. Along these lines, both the political parties and the academic field have tried to elucidate whether the communications issued have had the desired effects. Thus, political communication research has traditionally played a central role in the effects of mass media (McLeod, Kosicki and McLeod, 2002; Holtz-Bacha, 2017). It should be noted that while it is one of the most attractive fields of study, it is also the one that continues to generate more unresolved issues (Hernández-Santaolalla, 2018). In spite of the existing pessimism regarding the prediction of results, there are certain considerations that obtain consensus regarding which communica-

tion strategies usually obtain a greater or lesser success.

Investigations in this subject usually conclude that political communications, either about the candidate or about the party, do a good job in transferring information to voters regardless of whether or not they sympathize with the cause (Martin, 2004; Meirick, 2005; Kaid, Fernandes and Painter, 2011). Indistinctly of the attitude direction caused by the announcements, the mass communication experts agree that political advertising influences voter perceptions of the candidate (Lee Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Jung Yun and Gail LeGrange, 2007). This is an important result because to convey the image of the candidate or the party to the entire electorate is itself an advantage (Lee Kaid, 2008; Wojcieszak and Kim, 2016). The fact that the messages are received and the receiver remembers the candidate or the party does not ensure that the evaluation is positive (Kaid, 2001; Tedesco and Kaid, 2003). For this reason, the new inquiries about the effects are made focusing attention on comparing the reaction to positive and negative messages to find out which ones get a greater acceptance (Sádaba Garraza, 2003).

To that end, empirical works have been carried out and have shown a greater effectiveness in using positive messages (Matthes, 2013; Matthes, 2012; Hyun and Seo, 2019; Heiss and Matthes, 2019). It is argued that these have fewer adverse consequences than those that may result from negative campaigns of attacks on the opponent (García Bedaudoux, Dádamo and Slavinski, 2006; Nai and Walter, 2015). Although negative communications have a greater impact on mass media (Haselmayer, Meyer and Wagner, 2019), these tend to wake adverse emotions in voters and negatively influence the image of the issuers (Chang, 2001; Byrne and Hart, 2009; Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz,

2016). In favor of these communications, it has been expressed that fear contributes to increase the receiver's attention to political signals (Nabi, 2003; Valentino et al. 2008) and to process that information (Bradley et al. 2007; Lang, 1991). The difficulty derives from the handling of these emotions, anger can facilitate participation but not necessarily reflective participation. On the other hand, fear and sadness can increase the processing of information but with the adverse consequences of demobilization (Weber, 2012, p. 425).

Once the pros and cons of each type of communication have been summarized, we proceed with the data of this work.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this investigation is to carry out an analysis of the propaganda messages from the social network Twitter during the election campaign period. For this, the official accounts of the parties that obtained parliamentary representation in the Andalusian parliament on December 2, 2018 were analyzed: PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, Adelante Andalucía and VOX.

For this, the following specific objectives were proposed:

- a) Identify the type of digital propaganda used by each political party that obtained parliamentary representation in the electoral campaign for the 2018 Andalusian elections.
- b) Detect which classification of propaganda messages prevailed in each party.

Likewise, these objectives linked to the theory of the effects of electoral campaigns have led to a research question:

Do the results obtained in the vote correspond to the premises of the political effects?

3. METHODOLOGY

The research focuses on the electoral campaign of the regional elections for the presidency of the Junta de Andalucía held on December 2, 2018. The study elements that make up the field work are composed of the messages issued from the official Twitter profiles of the political parties during the 15 official days of the election campaign. The choice of this platform is due to the fact that it is often used to expand the messages already issued during the campaign that is presented in the traditional mass media (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2016). Studying the messages that political parties publish in this social network serves the main objective of this article: detect the type of campaign that each party has used, whether positive, negative or reactionary.

Among the parties that appeared at the elections, it was decided to choose those who obtained parliamentary representation: PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, Adelante Andalucía y VOX. The universe has been selected based on the criterion of representativeness. In this way, the profiles of the five parties that obtained a greater representativeness of votes in the elections have been chosen, jointly accumulating more than 85% of the votes.

Party	Seats
PSOE	33
PP	26
Ciudadanos	21
Adelante Andalucía	17
VOX	12
Total	109

Table 1

Tweets have been manually captured through the Twitter Search instrument in order to look for specific content from certain users and time periods. The official accounts of each party from the autonomous community of Andalusia were examined, except for the VOX party that does not have an extra account for communities and uses the national account. The search for own content tweets was chosen for the final analysis, excluding retweets. This is because these only serve to redistribute content published by other users of the network (Larsson, 2015). For its part, the study universe amounts to:

Party	Tweets
PSOE-A	243
PP	94
Ciudadanos	346
Adelante Andalucía	330
VOX	79
Total	1092

Table 2

The sample size with a confidence level of 95% and an error of ± 5 resulted in a total of 285 units to which a stratified random sampling with proportional affixing was applied:

Stratum	Identification	Nº of tweets in the stratum	Proportion	Stratum Sample
1	PSOE	243	22,3%	63
2	PP	94	8,6%	25
3	Ciudadanos	346	31,7%	90
4	Adelante Andalucía	330	30,2%	86
5	VOX	79	7,2%	21

Table 3

To achieve the objectives, a quantitative approach is proposed through a content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990; Igartua Perosanz, 2006; Benoit, 2010; Nuendorf and Kumar, 2015), this technique makes it possible to delve into the structure of the tweets and “detect the main trends regarding the management of Twitter by parties” (López Meri, 2016, p. 102).

3.1. DESIGN OF THE INVESTIGATION

The definitions made by Pineda (2006) have been considered to define the type of campaign that each party has used as a strategy, according to table four:

Propaganda typology	Definition
Afirmative	They perform praises on themselves and do not mention the opponent
Reactive	They mention positive qualities of the issuer and disqualify the opponent. They are presented as a solution
Negative	They attack the opponent without speaking positively of themselves
None	Informative

Table 4

Three variables of the data will be taken into account for the exploitation process: tweet composition, message typology (classified according to the “wheel of emotions” prepared by Kem (1989)) and the propaganda typology (Table 5).

It has been decided to sort the possible negative propaganda into five classifications based on the fact that disqualifying messages can respond to general ideologies or be specifically aimed at political parties (Harrington and Hess, 1994) (Table 6 and 7).

Classification of positives messages	Definition
Compassion	Desire to contribute to someone (or a sector) in a situation of unprotection
Ambition	Urgency to make a specific matter of economic interest
Nostalgia	Longing for the past
Tranquility	Satisfaction and current comfort - stability
Trust	Believe in the politician - Specific mention of the party candidate by another person
Intimacy	Feeling familiar with the politician
Hope	A better future and the ability to achieve it
National pride	Shared feeling of belonging

Table 5

Classification of negative messages	Definition
Guilt	Guilty for past and present offenses without specific association to another party
Fear	Fear of harm without specific association to another party
Anger	Wrath - displeasure without specific association to another party
Uncertainty	Distrust - anxiety for the future without specific association to another party
Opponent	Link the opponent with symbols considered negative by population (previous categories specifically associated with a match)

Table 6

Classification of neutral messages	Definition
Informative	Mention of activity without positive or negative emphasis (For example, announce an intervention).

Table 7

Ultimately, the analysis sheet with the associated variables and categories would be as follows:

1. Composition of the tweet: (1) Text; (2) Image; (3) Text+image; (4) Video; (5) Text+Video; (6) External link; (7) Text+link; (8) Text+link+image
2. Message typology: (1) Compassion; (2) Ambition; (3) Nostalgia; (4) Tranquility; (5) Trust; (6) Intimacy; (7) Hope; (8) National pride; (9) Guilt; (10) Fear; (11) Anger; (12) Uncertainty; (13) Opponent; (14) Informative
3. Type of propaganda: (1) Affirmative; (2) Reactive; (3) Negative; (4) None.
4. Observations: particular annotations (For example, in the case of mentioning a specific adversary, associate that mention expressly with one of the previous categories).

In the results section, a space has been left for a final qualitative variable that would allow to record certain notable issues. It is based on the complementarity of the qualitative methodology that exposes data with a greater difficulty of quantification (Andrade del Cid, 2009; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017).

4. ANDALUSIAN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN ON TWITTER

According to the considered variables, the exploitation of the data indicates the different propaganda strategies used by the political parties that obtained parliamentary representation. It should be noted that the type of propaganda that has been most used in all cases during the course of the electoral campaign (Graph 1) has been the affirmative, exceeding 50% of affirmative propaganda tweets in Ciudadanos (54,44%), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (53,97%) y VOX (52,38%). The use of this typology in Adelante Andalucía and Parti-

do Popular has remained at the threshold, with 45.35% and 48% respectively. However, it still is the most widely used.

Regarding the type of reactive propaganda there are notable differences between VOX (33,33%), Partido Popular (12%) y Adelante Andalucía (4,65%). In fact, Adelante Andalucía only resorted to it in 1.16% in the category of anger, presenting itself as a solution to the general problems of the Andalusian community, and in 3.49% expressly mentioning an adversary (Ciudadanos and PSOE). On the other hand, this party prevailed in the categories of negative propaganda (30.23%) and in merely informative tweets (19.77%), that is, messages that contributed nothing to the campaign. Up to 22.09% of the analyzed messages from Adelante Andalucía were dedicated to specifically attack opponents, embodied in Ciudadanos, PSOE and on one occasion in the general elections candidate from Partido Popular, Pablo Casado. (Figure 1).

As can be seen in figure 2, there is a significant difference in attack propaganda between the parties. Of all the negative propaganda messages in which express mention of the opponent is made (41 tweets), Adelante Andalucía (46.34%) leads the ranking followed by Ciudadanos (31.71%). PP (9.76%) and PSOE (9.76%) get a low frequency and lastly is VOX that has negatively mentioned an opponent only in a 2.44% of this classification. (Figure 2).

As has been seen so far, Adelante Andalucía (Graphs 1 and 2) leads the negative propaganda both by mentioning the opponent and in the cases where no particular party is mentioned. However, positive propaganda prevailed in the global comparison (Graph 1) with a difference of 15%.

Crossing the variables typology of the message and type of propaganda, the negative pro-

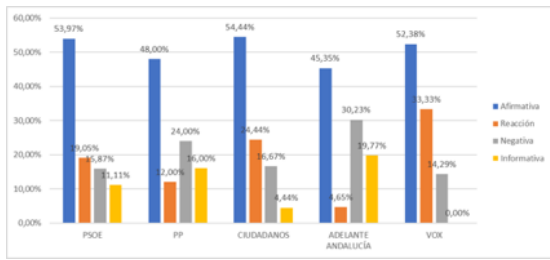


Figure 1. Party propaganda typology.



Figure 2. Negative propaganda – opponent.

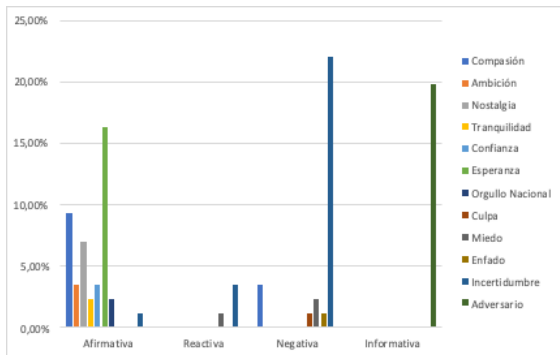


Figure 3. Adelante Andalucía

paganda of an adversary predominates in this party with a 22.09% (graph 3) followed by the merely informative information (19.77%) and the affirmative with the value of hope for a better future and ability to achieve it (16.28%). The affirmative propaganda is in the last place of the rest of the type of compassion with a value of 9.30%. If the specific categories are analyzed, the opponent (22.09%) of the negative typology (30.23%) prevails in general although the positive propaganda predominates (45.35%). With regard to reactive propaganda, it has been used to mention situations of uncertainty (3.49%) and highlights the value of fear. (Figure 3).

On the contrary, VOX (Graph 4) has chosen not to use its account as an informative tool (0%) and has dedicated to answer its adversaries in electoral arguments (28.57%), mainly carrying out attacks aimed at the socialism of the PSOE, Ciudadanos y Partido Popular. It conducted offenses based on the national pride professed by the party, this national pride is also exposed in the purely affirmative propaganda with a value of 9.52%. This percentage is shared with the category of trust placed in the party by another person outside the organization.

A range of categories used contrast with the following table that corresponds to Ciudadanos (Graph 5). The reactive propaganda of opponent typology directed to the PSOE also prevails (23.33%). In the affirmative category they follow the classification of hope in achieving a better future thanks to the party (16.77%) and ambition to make specific improvements in infrastructure (15.56%). However, the type of negative propaganda in this party also stands out with 14.4% in the category of opponent directed towards PSOE and PP. (Figure 4 and 5).

The thematic analysis of the Partido Popular (Graph 6) and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Graph 7) pose a different picture, they are the only parties where the classification of ambition corresponding to affirmative propaganda prevails (PP 28% and PSOE 15.87%) and the affirmative point of hope for a better future (12% and 9.52% respectively) appear with very similar frequencies. These two traditional parties of Spain differ in their strategy regarding negative propaganda. The Partido Popular has directly attacked the adversary more (16%), specifically PSOE and Ciudadanos. PSOE (7.94%) has focused more on spreading the fear of parties that threaten democracy. On the other hand, their official accounts have made an outstanding use of informative messages without propaganda value with 16% of

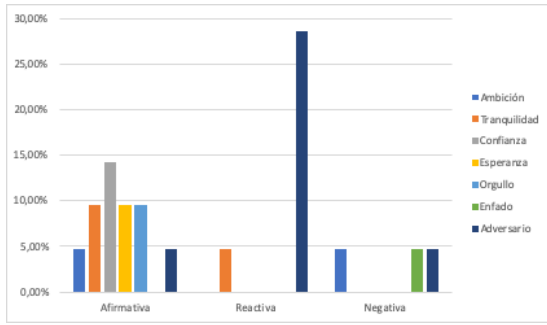


Figura 4. Vox

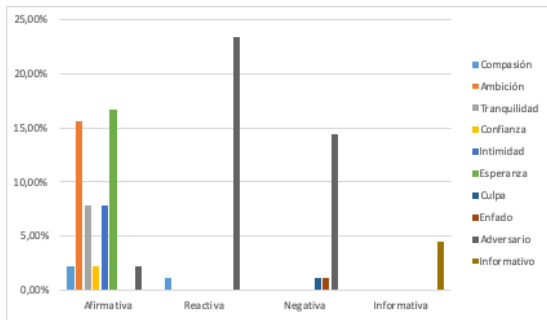


Figura 5. Ciudadanos

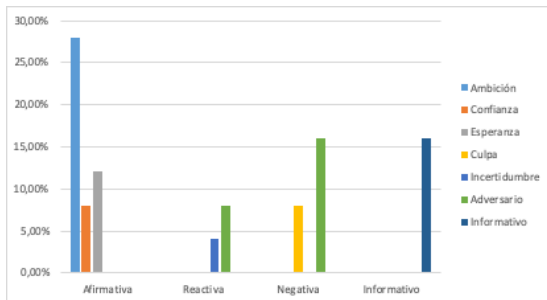


Figura 6. Partido Popular

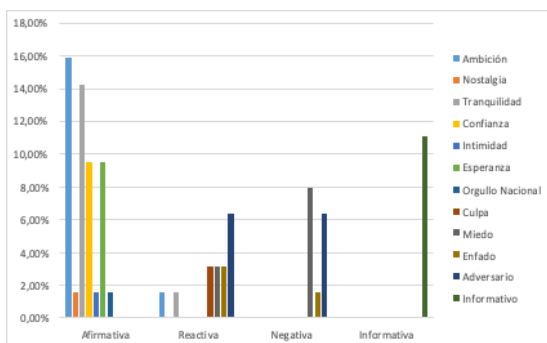


Figura 7. PSOE

the analyzed tweets of the PP and 11.11% of the PSOE messages. (Figure 6 and 7).

Finally, the composition of tweets reflects the predominance of the union of text and image in all political parties except VOX, which has mostly used a video that extended the speech transcribed in the message. On the other hand, traditional parties have agreed to use the text with a link that led to an extension of the message in the second place, especially for conventional mass media such as television. (Figure 8).

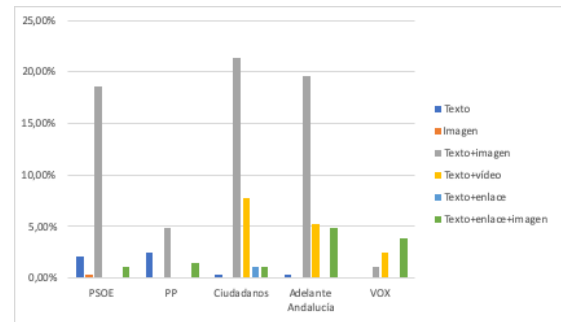


Figura 8.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This work sought to examine the typology and classification of propaganda messages that each party with representation in the Andalusian Parliament has used in the election campaign period of 2018.

The results have shown that the most used typology has been the affirmative: Ciudadanos (54.44%), PSOE (53.97%), VOX (52.38%), PP (48%) and Adelante Andalucía (45.35%). It has been observed that this homogeneity disappears with the other categories. In the case of negative propaganda, Adelante Andalucía (30.23%) predominates, followed by the Partido Popular with a difference of six points (24%). On the other hand, Ciudadanos (16.67%), PSOE (15.87%) and VOX (14.29%) are the ones who have used the least. In the case of reaction pro-

paganda, Adelante Andalucía (4.65%) and Partido Popular (12%) are the parties that have least exposed positive points about themselves and attacked the opponent in the same message. VOX has resorted to this category in a much higher percentage (33.33%) followed by Ciudadanos (24.44%), PSOE (19.05%) and PP (12%).

The second objective of the classification of propaganda categories provides the following scenario: the most recurrent affirmative categories have been hope (Ciudadanos 16,77%, Adelante Andalucía 16,28%, PP 12% and PSOE 9,52%), the economic ambition (PP 28%, PSOE 15.87% and Ciudadanos 15.56%), national pride (VOX 9.52%), trust in the party deposited by third parties (VOX 9.52%) and compassion (Adelante Andalucía 9.30%). In the negative categories, specific attacks have prevailed on the PSOE by Adelante Andalucía (22.09%), PP (16%), Ciudadanos (14.4%), and VOX (4.76 %). PSOE is a party that held power. Although in a smaller influx, these last three parties have also thrown negative messages between them (PP, Ciudadanos and VOX). In the PSOE, these attacks have had a very specific character because they have been framed in the fear strategy (7.94%) without specifically naming a specific organization: parties that undermine democracy.

Given these data, the percentage of its use is significant although no party has exceeded the use of the type of negative propaganda by 50% and has not carried out an attack campaign, especially in the case of Adelante Andalucía (30.23%). These figures give rise to the question of the study, what can be extracted from these results in relation to the theories of political effects? (Table 8).

In this regard, it should be remembered that negative messages are dangerous to the issuer for several reasons. One of them is the possibility that by launching them, they can serve

Partido	% Negativos	Escaños 2018
PSOE-A	15,87	33
PP	24	26
Ciudadanos	16,67	21
Adelante Andalucía	30,23	17
VOX	14,29	12
Total		109

Table 8. Election results

Partido	Escaños 2018	Escaños 2015
PSOE	33	47
PP	26	33
Ciudadanos	21	9
Adelante Andalucía	17	15 ¹
VOX	12	-
Total	109	109

Table 9.

to campaign for the ideology or party they are attacking (Chang, 2001; Byrne and Hart, 2009; Walter, 2014; Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2016). In this work, Adelante Andalucía has been the largest issuer of negative messages and that could confirm the theory of its danger. Although it is ahead of VOX, it should be noted that this far-right party entered the parliament for the first time through these elections, obtaining twelve seats in its first attempt. Adelante Andalucía has lost a total of three seats compared to the previous elections (which participated as the Izquierda Unida and Podemos Andalucía). It would be interesting in this case to know if the same strategy was used in the previous elections. However, a comparative report on the campaign strategy and the results obtained in each case cannot be made because there is no data on the type of campaign carried

out in 2015, opening a question of interest for future research. (Table 9).

Regarding the parties that participated in the 2015 elections, Adelante Andalucía has been the most affected and the one that least used the types of affirmative messages (45.35%). The parties that have risen the most were Ciudadanos with twelve seats (from 9 to 21 seats) and VOX with twelve other seats. These have used the categories of hope (16.67% Ciudadanos) and trust (9.67% VOX) more, confirming the theory that positive messages are most influential (Matthes, 2013; Matthes, 2012; Hyun and Seo, 2019; Heiss and Matthes, 2019). The values that Ciudadanos and VOX have used are notable for being the ones that mostly appeal to emotion, in addition to the trust granted by resorting to third parties that endorse the candidacy (VOX). The party that held power until those elections, PSOE, has used the classification of tranquility (14.29%) and ambition (15.28%) to a greater extent. These has been used by the Partido Popular in economic terms (28%). It is noted that three parties have resorted to these networks frequently for informational purposes only, without adding anything of value to the campaign: Adelante Andalucía 19.77%; Partido Popular 16% and PSOE 11.11%.

After observing the obtained results and in line with the empirical evidence, it is determined that the party that has used the most negative propaganda has been the most affected in the elections. For their part, those who have appealed to positive values such as hope and trust have benefited the most. It is striking that the results of the discussion of this work reinforce the premises on the ineffectiveness of negative campaigns. However, it is pointed out that the nature of this study does not allow establishing these correlations with firmness, so it would be of interest for future research to cross the results with studies on the electorate to conti-

nue deepening on political campaigns and their effects. It must be remembered that, although in confluence with other forces that exert pressure on the voter, the propaganda campaigns of this period can be decisive.

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