

Presentation

The Battle for Meaning: Discourses and Media Strategies in Contemporary Political Elections

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In contemporary democracies, election campaigns constitute one of the epicentres of symbolic production and of the contest over the meaning of the public realm. In these periods of high semiotic density, political parties, leaders, social organisations, media corporations, and citizen networks deploy complex discursive strategies to exert a decisive influence on public opinion.

From a classical perspective, campaigns have been defined as planned actions aimed at winning votes and maximising electoral returns. However, more recent theoretical approaches view them as communicative events in which information saturation and audience fragmentation demand highly differentiated communication from the various actors, capable of generating identification, allegiance, and affect.

In this regard, in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Political Marketing*, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy (2003) already pointed out the inherent limitations

of persuasion, warning that reducing political communication to mere marketing tactics proves futile for understanding the logics of social allegiance. Building on this premise, political discourse during campaigns can be seen to operate along a dual dimension. On the one hand, its primary goal is to mobilise the electorate and convince voters of the validity, viability, and superiority of specific policy proposals. On the other hand, these discourses act as strategic devices of symbolic production that reinforce collective belongings and contribute to shaping social, political, and partisan imaginaries in a stable manner. Furthermore, interest in these dynamics converges with growing concern both within and beyond academia regarding the current state of the public sphere, perceived as increasingly radicalised and polarised.

In recent years, several of the most prominent academic journals in the field of political communication have dedicated special issues to these phenomena. Among them, the journal *Political Communication* stands out, having published three distinct special issues of high relevance to this debate. The first of these, “(Digital) Campaigning in Dissonant Public Spheres” (2023), explores how political parties adapt to public spheres labelled as polarised. Subsequently, the special issue “Listening as Power in Political Communication” (2025) analyses power asymmetries and political listening, showing how candidates draw on topics from digital public discourse to shape opinion and respond to grassroots discontent. Finally, the volume “Multi-Platform Research” (2026) examines how political communication flows through fragmented, multi-platform digital ecosystems, forcing a rethinking of current dissemination strategies.

For its part, from the perspective of strategic management, the *Journal of Political Marketing* has addressed these dynamics through two issues centred on recent US electoral cycles. The first of these, “Political Marketing and the Election of 2020” (2022), explores how political marketing leveraged social media to forge socio-political identities through emotional and antagonistic discourses during the 2020 presidential election. Along these lines, “Special Issue on the 2022 Midterm Congressional Election” (2024) delves into the analysis of electoral marketing, targeting, and mobilisation tactics.

Finally, the contribution of the journal *index.comunicación* deserves mention, with its special issue on “Política Pop Online” (2022), which addresses spectacularisation, politainment, and the extreme personalisation of candidates on social media, demonstrating how popular culture formats act as agents of political socialisation and meaning production.

In dialogue with these perspectives, which range from digital spheres and electoral marketing to the influence of popular culture, the analyses comprising this issue prioritise the exploration of electoral discourses as a cultural space for the construction of political, social, and community identities. Likewise, they take up the challenge of overcoming, albeit only partially, the traditional institutionalist approach; that is, without overlooking the centrality of political parties in the electoral arena, they also broaden the focus to include other influential social voices in public opinion.

This special issue brings together six research studies that demonstrate the theoretical diversity of the field, committing to a methodological pluralism in which quantitative and qualitative perspectives converge. This volume opens with the article “Campaigns in Transition: Spain’s Radical Left Reframed” by political science and communication scholars Sergio Pérez-Castaños, María Carmen Hortigüela Arroyo, and Jonatan García Rabadán. This study examines the transformation of the Spanish radical left in the 2019 and 2024 European elections through a mixed-methods design. Combining the systematic coding of campaign materials with Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), the authors diagnose a process they term “communicative normalisation”. Specifically, the study reveals how progressive party institutionalisation shifts the discourse away from emotional and symbolic mobilisation towards a more rationalised and technocratic communicative repertoire.

Next, the article “Emociones y *engagement* en la competición política digital en las elecciones generales de España 2023”, authored by digital communication and political behaviour specialists Paulo Carlos López-López, Gemma Vicente Iglesias, and María García-Maseda, addresses the posts made on the social network X by the main candidates during the electoral process. Drawing on an approach that combines content analysis with automated sentiment analysis, the research shows that affective polarisation and engagement depend not exclusively on the leaders’ volume of posts, but also on the digital reactivation generated by offline events. In particular, their “bivariate” analysis confirms dynamics of inter-community emotional contagion and points to a predominance of positive emotions.

The following article, “Analysing femonationalist discourses in campaign spots” by political scientists Javier Antón-Merino and Sandra García-Santamaría, examines how the Spanish populist radical right instrumentalizes gender equality in its campaign spots. Based on videos from Plataforma per Catalunya and Vox, the study points out how the use of femonationalism legitimize exclusionary nativist agendas, racializing sexism and constructing women as cultural borders of the nation to justify securitization policies.

A different perspective is offered by the article “Destruir la imagen del enemigo político: estrategias de cancelación en textos visuales durante la campaña electoral argentina de 2023”, which shifts the focus towards the dynamics of urban social discursivity. Its author, discourse analysis specialist Sebastián Moreno, adapts the well-known axiological model of semiotician Jean-Marie Floch to identify the cancellation strategies applied to street posters and graffiti in a highly conflictual electoral context.

For its part, the article “‘For Spain!’: Constructing the Spanish People in Vox’s Social Media Videos”, by semioticians Marcello Serra and Rayco González, analyses the discursive construction of the Spanish people on the official social media profiles of Vox and its candidates. The research reconstructs the discursive logic that enables the party to resolve an apparent paradox typical of populism: how is it possible to claim to embody the authentic values of the people when securing only a minority fraction of the vote?

Finally, the volume closes with the article “Campaña digital en clave de género: un estudio de caso de las elecciones autonómicas andaluzas de 2022 a través de Facebook”, authored by political science researchers José Manuel Trujillo and Juana M. Ruiloba-Núñez, and political analyst Paloma Muñoz-Tamayo. Based on a content analysis of the Facebook profiles of the main Andalusian parties, this text shows how gender issues serve as a political and ideological differentiator, frequently articulated through frames of confrontation and negative campaigning.

Taken together, the papers included in this special issue point to the influence of voices situated beyond institutional and partisan boundaries in the construction of socio-political identities. We leave it now to the academic community to untangle these distinct perspectives, in the hope that this volume serves as a catalyst for future debates on the electoral phenomenon.

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