Internal democracy of political parties in the age of political communication 2.0: the case of the 2018 primary elections of the Partido Popular

La democracia interna de los partidos en la era de la comunicación política 2.0: el caso de las primarias del partido popular de 2018

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Abstract:

In the summer of 2018, the Popular Party *(Spanish: Partido Popular, PP)* held its first national primaries to elect its president. This study aims to analyse, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the Twitter campaign of the two main candidates in the two stages of this process

Resumen:

En verano de 2018, el Partido Popular celebró sus primeras primarias a nivel nacional para elegir a su presidente. El presente estudio tiene como objeto el análisis, tanto cuantitativo como cualitativo, de la campaña en Twitter de los dos principales candidatos en las dos etapas de dicho

of internal democracy: from 23 June to 5 July, and from 6 to 21 July. The results show that social networks are a necessary instrument in candidates' political communication strategy, as they encourage citizen participation and instant communication, and they allow interaction as well. Nevertheless, the findings also point out that this social network has not fully capitalized on its potential, as the one-way transmission of content has taken centre stage.

Keywords:

Twitter; internal democracy; primaries; *Partido Popular*; political communication.

proceso de democracia interna: del 23 de junio al 5 de julio, y del 6 y al 21 de julio. Los resultados demuestran cómo las redes sociales son un instrumento necesario en la estrategia de comunicación política de los candidatos al favorecer la participación ciudadana y la comunicación instantánea, así como también posibilitando la interacción. No obstante, también evidencian un desaprovechamiento del potencial que tiene la red social al prevalecer la transmisión unidireccional de contenidos.

Palabras clave:

Twitter; democracia interna; primarias; Partido Popular; comunicación política.

1. Introduction

1.1. The importance of primary elections as an instrument of political participation

In recent years, numerous phenomena have taken place in Spain that have called into question the permanence of some of the classic parameters of democracy. Some of them, including deliberation, citizen representation, the separation and independence of public powers, and the accountability to citizens of those in power, are fundamental in guaranteeing the legitimacy of the current political system (Torcal and Christmann, 2020; Coller et al., 2019; González de la Garza, 2018; Rodríguez, 2015; Aznar and Pérez, 2014; Villoria, 2011; Rosanvallon, 2009 Cohen, 2007; O'Donnell, 2004; among others). Likewise, the assessment of political parties by citizens has deteriorated considerably (Torcal, 2008). The retrospective opinion of citizens reveals that parties have turned their backs on society (Maravall, 2013) and left the areas of interaction with citizens desolate (Mair, 2008).

This crisis of political parties has been widely addressed in the literature. There is a widespread theory that states that part of the transformations that parties are undergoing result from the crisis of the democratic system to a large extent (Vargas, 1988). Some authors speak of a "gradual process of deterioration" of democratic quality that has been taking place over the last two decades (Ruiz and Bovero, 2005, p. 57), resulting from the abuse of their dominant position (Garrido, 2017). This is an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy, which has generated an obvious disconnection with the rank and file members of political parties. Moreover, this has not gone unnoticed by citizens (Garrido, 2017), as evidenced by successive opinion polls carried out by the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (*CIS*). As a result, parties have been forced to seek new ways to carry out participation (Di Palma, 1970, p. 30), and to reconsider their structure, model and internal selection process (Conde, 2019).

However, a decline in trust in institutions (Torcal, 2006) does not necessarily have to be negative, nor a bad omen. In the long run, it may provide a kind of incentive to improve the system by establishing "new, more demanding criteria for assessing the performance of government" (Inglehart, 1998, p. 392). In other words, "a certain degree of mistrust may be a necessary condition for democratic quality" (Llera, 2014, p. 197), as it creates niches of opportunity for the implementation of measures aimed at enhancing democratic standards (Gómez and Navarro, 2019).

The need for internal democracy in political groupings has been present since the emergence of large-scale, mass parties (Vírgala, 2015). In the Spanish political system, reconsidering the selection of the elite, as well as the configuration of the internal party structure, took place at the end of the 20th century (Pérez, 2012). In 1998, the first primary elections in Spain were held within the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* [*PSOE*], in Spanish). This represented a breakthrough for participatory democracy in this country by placing an important decision in the hands of the rank and file members of a political party. It also started a debate in the media about "the legitimacy of the process, as well as the problems it generated, and whether the process should be restricted to party members only or open to all citizens, and most importantly, the erosion that it might produce within the party" (Conde, 2019, p. 194).

From that moment on, there were primaries at the national, regional and/or local levels to designate the leaders and/or heads of lists of different political formations that competed in successive elections (Rodríguez et al., 2010). It was in 2015 when a turning point occurred for two reasons. On the one hand, after "the implosion of the party system" (Giménez, 2019, p.23), the holding of general elections in that year meant the institutional entry of parties whose essence consisted of renewing democracy and transparency, as well as greater political participation in the decision-making process. Among their slogans, one that stands out refers to the need for internal democracy and the role of rank and file members in determining the candidates who assume positions of leadership in representing the party. On the other hand, traditional parties felt obligated to employ strategies in order to adapt to the new circumstances (Rodríguez et al., 2010), due to the crisis of legitimacy. They also had to confront disaffection in order to meet the new standards of transparency and participation set by the nascent political formations, which viewed internal party democracy as an effective way of increasing democracy in general (Maravall, 2013).

Most political groupings with parliamentary representation have introduced primaries for the election of their leaders. This has increased the participation of party members in the decision-making process regarding the organisation and structure of parties, thereby increasing credibility and renewed interest in the political system (Haro, 1992).

With regard to this candidate selection model, this doctrine has become an effective way of measuring the democratisation of political parties (Garrido, 2017), as well as a valuable instrument for resolving the difficult process of replacing political leaders (Boix, 1998). However, experience has revealed some drawbacks with primary elections. Among them, the literature shows that primaries might be construed as a sign of the inability to govern, or a sign of political opportunism on the part of their leaders, or possibly even a contradiction by presenting divergent internal positions. They might also lead to excessive fragmentation, thereby weakening intra-party cohesion. Primary elections might also foster rivalries among diverse political trends, solidify conflicts hidden from the public, and highlight the differences between the political promises made to party members and voters (Conde, 2019; Blanco Valdés, 2016; Maravall, 2013; Boix, 1998; Haro, 1992).

Nevertheless, the empirical reality shows the importance of primary elections in the selection of candidates, bearing two issues in mind. On the one hand, continued work is needed to improve the functioning of these processes in order to guarantee the participation of citizens in their diverse roles (Ignazi, 2021). On the other hand, progress must be made toward a more complex, nuanced political culture (Innerarity, 2019), which could mitigate the problems derived from these primary elections. The question is whether or not primaries are the most appropriate way to generate more plurality and give greater relevance to those represented (Boix, 1998). In view of this situation, one can affirm that although primaries have become a nearly inescapable

requirement, they should not be considered the only way to specifically improve the quality of internal party democracy, nor the democratic quality of the system in general. Otherwise, disaffection with politics and threats to the democratic system are likely to remain or worsen in the future, even if the reasons for this may change (Innerarity, 2002; Sartori et al., 1999).

1.2. Primary elections of the Partido Popular in the era of political communication 2.0

Society is increasingly aware of the importance of strengthening internal party democracy, and the way in which primary elections can contribute to this aim. However, citizens have little knowledge about the selection instruments used by parties, other than the rules contained in their statutes (Coller et al., 2019; Cordero and Coller, 2015). The statutes include the existence of closed primaries (such is the case with *PSOE* and *Ciudadanos*), in which party members choose the candidates for public positions through a vote that is direct, free, and confidential. They also include open primaries (such is the case with *Compromís* and *Podemos*), which are those in which any citizen, affiliated or not, who is a registered voter can participate in the designation of candidates.

The *Partido Popular* has decided to hold closed primaries in accordance with articles 31 and 32 of the National Statutes of the Party, approved at the XVIII National Congress held in February 2017 in Madrid, in both the Regulatory Guidelines of Congresses as well as the Regulations for the XIX Extraordinary National Congress of the *Partido Popula*r. Thus, according to the agreement adopted on 11 June 2018 by the National Board of Directors, the XIX National Congress of the *Partido Popular* was held as an extraordinary event in Madrid on 20-21 July of 2018.

Its mission was to elect the president of the Party, who would consequently be the candidate who might be selected and sworn in by Congress as President of the Government after the subsequent general elections. To this end, the nomination period for candidates was opened at 12 noon on the 18th of June. Those eligible to apply included all of those who had been members for at least the past 12 months and were up-to-date on payment of their membership fees, and who had the support of at least 100 members in full use of their rights. Six party leaders presented their candidacy to the Congress Organising Committee before 2 p.m. on 20 June: Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, Pablo Casado, María Dolores de Cospedal, José Manuel García Margallo, José Ramón García Hernández, and Elio Cabanes. Finally, after José Luis Bayo's candidacy was ruled out due to an error with the endorsements, the candidates for the party's presidency were officially proclaimed on 22 June, and the internal election campaign began.

The campaign ran from 23 June to 4 July, with the first round of voting taking place on 5 July with an 86% turnout. All party members who had registered to vote by 25 June were able to participate in the vote. The results were as follows: Sáenz de Santamaría obtained 37.03 % of the vote; Casado, 34.36 %; Cospedal, 25.97 %; García Margallo, 1.17 %; García Hernández, 1.15 %; and Cabanes had 0.32 %.

None of the candidates obtained at least 50 % of the votes in the first ballot, nor had anyone kept a distance of at least 15 points from the other contenders nor obtained an absolute majority in at least half of the sixty electoral constituencies.

Thus, under the terms established by article 16.9 of the Framework Regulations for Congresses, the two candidates who received the most votes, Sáenz de Santamaría and Casado, were proclaimed the final two candidates. Both had to undergo a new vote in

order to obtain the support of the 3,082 delegates[1] during the Congress held on 20 and 21 July of 2018. Finally, in the second vote, Casado emerged victorious with 1,701 (57.2 %) of the 2,973 votes cast, 451 more than Sáenz de Santamaría.

This type of primary chosen by the *Partido Popular* is part of the dynamics of the relationship between members and the party's governing bodies, according to which "it is not a question of transferring part of the decision regarding candidates to the citizens as a whole, but of democratising as much as possible how the decision-making process is carried out within the party itself, and of strengthening members' rights" (Giménez, 2014: 219). Clearly, the PP considers this to be a highly significant, relevant internal process. Through these primary elections, the party displays an image of internal democracy and transparency, both *ad intra* (inside) and *ad extra* (outside), thereby providing itself with leadership that arises from the will of the party's rank and file members.

To emphasise this image, the use of social networks was a crucial element in connecting with the affiliated voters (and with the delegates in the second round), in order to achieve broad participation. One of the main aspects of elections within political parties is the communication strategy, which must ensure the participation of party members and supporters. Along these lines, in recent years social networks have been consolidated as fundamental instruments of political communication, both in electoral and primary campaigns, and in all other political processes as well (Marcos, et al., 2021; González, et al, 2020; Bustos and Ruiz, 2019; Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Vázquez, 2017; Quevedo et al., 2016; López, 2016; López et al., 2016; García, 2016; Gamir, 2016; Machado and Capdevila, 2016; Sampedro et al., 2013; Abejón et al., 2012; Barberá and Rivero, 2012; Izquierdo, 2012; Congosto et al., 2011; Castells, 2010, among others).

Their use as a weapon for political action, or as a means for politicians and institutions to establish a connection with citizens, is no longer a mere possibility for the future, but an undisputed reality at the present time (Vallespín, 2011). This is due to the fact that social networks are used as an open, fast, effective, horizontal, two-way channel for communication and the dissemination of information, in order to make sure the message arrives to the voters-users with hardly any mediation or access barriers. They also stand out for enabling self-promotion and the viralisation of messages adjusted to the needs of the candidates in the campaign (Galán-García, 2017). During this type of electoral period, Twitter is a key dissemination channel both for "publicising electoral programmes and promises made by candidates" (Simón, 2019, p. 79), and for criticising political opponents as well (Conde, 2019; Mouffe, 2010; Boix, 1998), in order to obtain the support of voters.

At the same time, in today's networked society (Castells, 2006, 2000), the percentage of the audience that consumes content from diverse platforms is increasing, leaving behind the usual way of obtaining political or other information (Pérez et al., 2017). This is due to the plethora of opportunities offered by ICT for interaction and conversation, with party members and supporters being co-participants in more deliberative politics (Steenbergen et al., 2003). Affiliates or members of political organisations comprise a public that is active and informed, with a penchant for participation (Bustos and Ruiz, 2019; Sampedro and Resina, 2010). As a consequence of this situation, the development of electoral processes on the Internet provides tools that allow users to go beyond mediatised political discourse toward a narrative that is more innovative and based on interaction and the in-depth analysis of issues (Machado and Capdevila, 2016).

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1 The National Congress shall be constituted, according to the provisions of the Statutes, by the long-standing as well as the elected delegates. The latter will number 2,612 –40 to the Party abroad and 10 to the Organising Commission, by virtue of the agreement adopted by the National Board of Directors on 11 June 2018.

Thus, the revitalising efforts of political parties as a result of introducing primary elections into their way of proceeding and organising themselves has increased with the transfer of these electoral processes to social media. These are the spaces where network democracy (Sampedro et al., 2013) or democracy 2.0 (Caldevilla, 2009) takes place. Social networks also allow more citizen involvement in political decisions through new types of participation (Sánchez, 2014). Thus, since 2016, Twitter has been effectively and efficiently integrated into the communication strategies of political parties and the candidates themselves (Lee and Lim, 2016). On the other hand, the opportunities offered by the Internet are not being fully exploited, given the scarce or even non-existent interaction between politicians and their voters. With some exceptions, the use of Twitter as a traditional communication platform has prevailed, yet with the predomination of one-way transmission of content, in practice (Renobell, 2021; Zugasti and Pérez, 2015; López et al., 2015; Criado et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2010). As a result, Twitter has not been used to establish dialogue between candidates, but rather to generate *deaf* dialogues in the best of cases (López, 2016).

2. Methodology

Based on the foregoing context, the aim of this research is to analyse the use of communication on Twitter in the process of democratisation that the celebration of primary elections represents for political parties. For this purpose, we have studied the presence and activity on this social network of the two main candidates who competed in the *PP* primary elections in June and July of 2018. Specifically, we have examined the two stages of the process. The first phase ran from 23 June to 5 July, with the latter date being the day on which the two candidates with the most votes were chosen. The second phase was carried out from 6 to 21 July, and again, the latter date was the day on which the second vote took place during the party's 19th Congress. In addition to examining this entire scenario, we have not neglected to study interaction with citizens.

The study period was determined based on the deadlines established for the election of the party's president, as stipulated in the Regulations for the XIX Extraordinary National Congress of the *PP*, given the existence of more than two candidates, according to the terms of article 11.c of the aforementioned Regulations.

The selection of the candidates to be studied was made by taking into account those who had passed the first round of the primary elections, and who competed in the second phase to be elected President of the party (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the voting by party members in the first round

Sáenz de Santamaría	21,513
Casado Blanco	19,967
De Cospedal	15,090
García Margallo	680
García Hernández	668
Cabanes Sanchís	85

Sources: prepared by the authors based on data published by the PP

The following hypotheses have been set forth, based on research related to changes in political communication procedures in connection with the development of Internet and social media, specifically in general and primary elections.

– H1: In terms of content of the messages, it is expected that the variable "proposals" will be the most used by the two candidates.

– H2: It is foreseen that the messages framed in the variable "criticism" will be directed at members of other political parties. On the other hand, we do not expect to find messages critical of other candidates from their own party.

– H3: Broad public participation is to be expected in response to the content published by the candidates.

– H4: It is predicted that the 2.0 platform will be under-used as a tool to make the process of internal democracy visible during the primary elections, as the candidates will mostly resort to one-way use of the channel.

In order to answer the hypotheses, a social research method based on content analysis of the political texts has been used. This is considered an established technique for determining the positions of political parties and their leaders (Alonso, Gómez and Volkens, 2012). The main objective pursued by content analysis is the structured representation of a large volume of data. Manual coding of the data was also attempted which, broadly speaking, can be identified with the domain of qualitative techniques (Navarro and Díaz, 1994). To this end, a qualitative analysis of the discourses has been carried out as well.

Content analysis of a political message involves making decisions related to the sample, the breakdown into coding units, and the specific coding technique to be applied. In this regard, the sample is composed of 1,288 messages posted on Twitter in the period under study.

Examination of each coding unit, which corresponds to every tweet that comprises the sample as a whole, has been carried out on two levels; one quantitative, and the other qualitative. For the quantitative analysis of the period indicated above, the total number of tweets and retweets on the profiles of Casado and Sáenz de Santamaría were collected and counted manually. When the candidates used the Twitter option that allowed them to retweet a message by adding a message of their own, these were counted as their own tweets, due to the fact that by adding a comment they are generating their own content, which must be analysed specifically. Moreover, within the two candidates' own messages, the total number of retweets, likes, and comments were recorded in order to measure the degree of citizen interaction with the candidates.

With regard to the development of a classification chart, also called a coding system, the following codes or variables have been established, in which the examined units of analysis have been classified as follows:

1	Information related to the primary election process (date and format of the ballot, procedural rules, etc.)
2	Information on campaign events
3	Call for participation and mobilisation to go to the polls
4	Active request to vote
5	Announcement of policy proposals
6	News headlines published in the media for the dissemination of interviews
7	Messages of support for the candidate from users

8	Messages of support from the candidate to the political party
9	Messages of criticism
10	Other (messages that present content unrelated to the primary elections)

Of these units of analysis, one is pointed out after the message has been read in full, and in this way, they are mutually exclusive variables[2].

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative data analysis

After compiling the information, a total of 1,288 messages were obtained. Of these, 432 tweets were found on Sáenz de Santamaría's profile, and 856 on that of Casado. Thus, an initial assessment of the data shows more intensive use by the candidate who ultimately won the party's primary election, with 66.5 % of the total sample analysed.

Table 2. Number of messages published on the Twitter profiles of Sáenz de Santamaría and Casado for the periods analysed

	Total no. of tweets	RTs	Personal tweets	% Personal tweets	Avg. per day (of the total)
Saenz de Santamaría					
26/06/2018–05/07/2018	201	51	150	74.62 %	20
06/07/2018–21/07/2018	231	68	163	70.56 %	14.4
TOTAL	432	119	313		
Casado					
26/06/2018–05/07/2018	394	129	265	67 %	39.4
06/072018–21/07/2018	462	185	277	60 %	28.8
TOTAL	856	314	542		

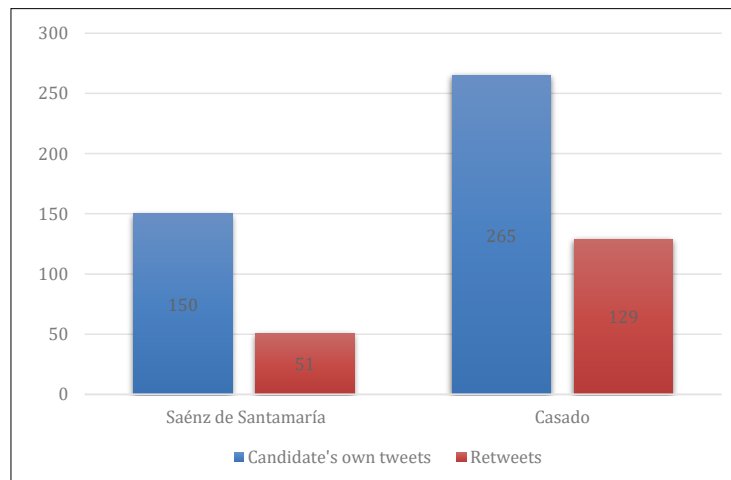**Source: prepared by the authors based on data from www.twitter.com**

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2   After the categorisation of all the tweets analysed, a control phase was carried out regarding the results obtained. For this purpose, 10% of the total sample studied was selected to undergo a new coding by a researcher outside the study herein, in accordance with the pre-established variables. The percentage of coincidence found was within the terms established by Igartua (2006), which guarantee the reliability of research of this type.

When comparing the number of messages published by both candidates in the two periods analysed, it can be seen that Casado continues to be the one with the greatest presence on the social network, both through his own tweets and retweets. In the first phase, Sáenz de Santamaría published 150 messages of her own and retweeted 51messages, while Casado published 265 messages of his own and retweeted 129. In the second phase, Sáenz de Santamaría published 163 of her own messages and retweeted 68 times, compared to Casado with 277 tweets of his own and 185 retweets.

From the average number of messages published by each candidate per day in each period of the campaign, two observations can be made. On the one hand, there is a trend toward greater intensity of average daily activity during the period from 26 June to 5 July, during which time the competition included four other candidates who did not move on to the second round. On the other hand, it can be seen that Casado is the one who maintains a higher average number of daily publications in both periods. While Sáenz de Santamaría has an average of 20 daily messages in the first period, compared to 14.4 in the second, Casado has an average of 39.4 daily tweets in the first phase, compared to 28.8 in the second period of the campaign.

The data show that the two cases analysed display a higher incidence of self-made messages in both periods. In the first period, Casado's figure stands at 67%, and for Sáenz de Santamaría, the rate is 74.6%, while in the second period, the numbers are 60% in Casado's profile and 70.5% for that of Sáenz de Santamaría.

Chart 1. Total number of tweets and retweets in the first period of the primaries

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from a www.twitter.com

Chart 2. Total number of tweets and retweets in the second period of the primaries
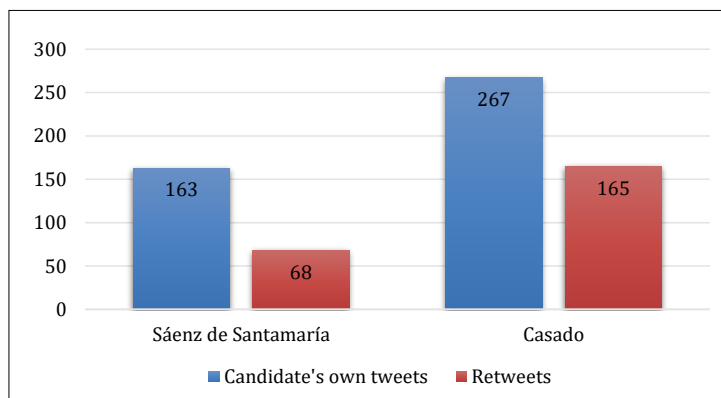
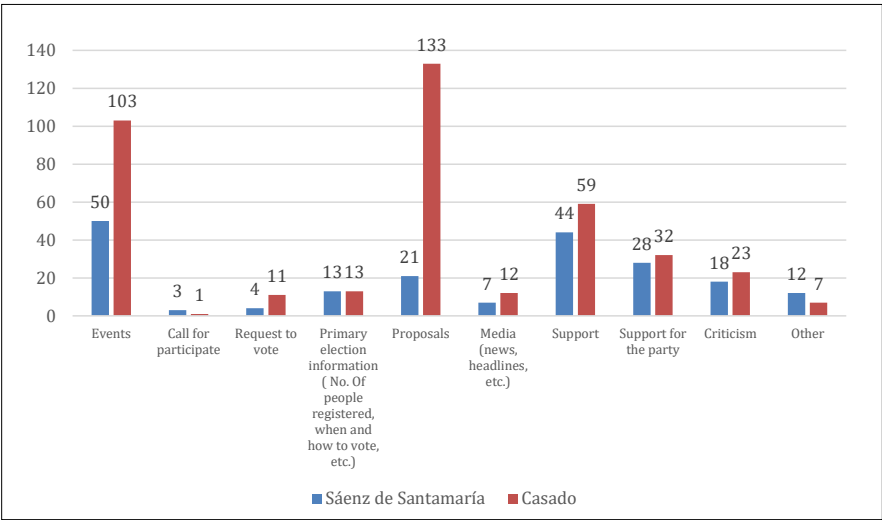Source: prepared by the authors based on data from www.twitter.com

3.2. Qualitative data analysis

By focusing attention on the predominant content of the messages published on the official Twitter profiles of Casado and Sáenz de Santamaría, a series of similarities and differences can be observed in the prevailing issues of their discursive approaches (Graphs 3 and 4). This highlights the discrepancies in their priorities and campaign strategy.

3.2.1. Qualitative results in the first round of voting

During the period from 26 June to 5 July, when they were running alongside four other candidates, the predominant variable in the tweets published by Casado was the presentation of proposals, while that of Sáenz de Santamaría was the promotion of campaign events. Both variables reflect the candidates' interest in maintaining a close relationship with party members/voters, either by presenting them with his proposals (in the case of Casado) or by referring to the campaign events in which these proposals would be presented live (the case of Sáenz de Santamaría). The second variable that is most frequently used by Casado is that which refers to campaign events, and the third most often used by Sáenz de Santamaría is that which makes reference to proposals.

Chart 3. Thematic content of the tweets published on the candidates' profiles during the first campaign period –from 26/06 to 5/07–

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from www.twitter.com

Another variable that is important for both candidates is the one related to support, either in reference to the backing received from third parties, or the candidate's own support for the political agenda that he or she intends to lead after winning the primaries. As for the support received from other users of the social network, it should be noted that this variable is the second most frequently used by Sáenz de Santamaría and the third most used by Casado.

It is also important to note how the candidates make use of a feature provided by the microblogging network, which consists of being able to retweet a message of other users by adding a comment of their own. Although it is true that in Casado's case, it is used much less frequently, both candidates use it in order to publicly show their gratitude to their followers and to achieve an image of greater proximity between the candidates and potential voters.

With regard to the variable of support for the party, both give it considerable weight: it is the fourth most frequently used option by Casado and the third most used by Sáenz de Santamaría. Regarding the variable relating to criticism, it holds fifth place in the two cases under study. As this is not a typical campaign in the sense that it pits two people from the same party against each other, there is no proclivity for one candidate to criticize the other, but rather to denounce leaders of other political formations and parties.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the scarce attention paid by both candidates in the first round of the primaries to two variables which, *a priori*, should be among the most used in the campaign period: the call for participation and the request for people to vote.

3.2.2. Qualitative Results in the Second Round

During the period from 6 to 21 July, when only the two final candidates in the sample under analysis were competing, a similar pattern to that of the first round was observed in the discourse of the candidates on the social network. The three most common variables are those related to presenting proposals for the political project they are leading, the support they receive from other users (especially those who will be delegates in the Congress on 21 July), and support for the political party they intend to lead.

Chart 4. Thematic content of the tweets published on the candidates' profiles during the second period of the campaign –6/07 to 21/07–
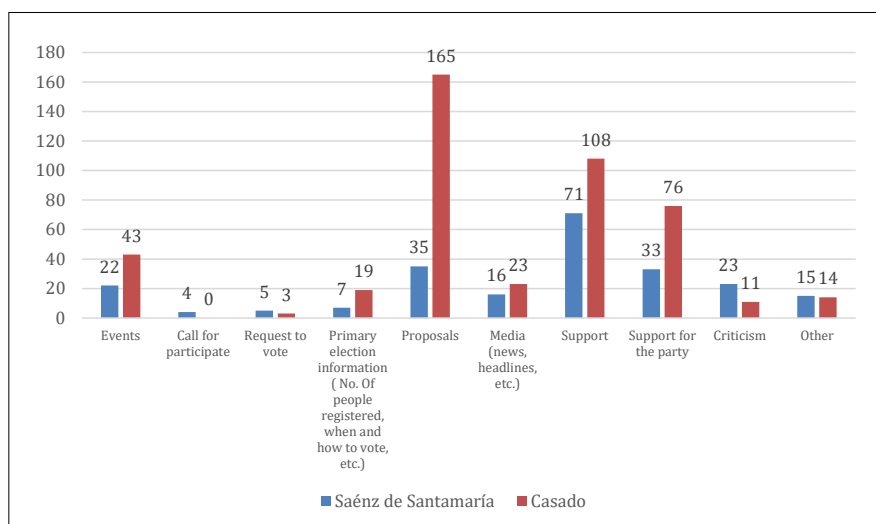
**Source: prepared by the authors based on data from www.twitter.com**

In Casado's profile, 59.6 % of the messages published during the second round are devoted to the presentation of his political programme that he intends to implement if he obtains the necessary support to lead the party. Due to the fact that victory in the primaries would imply being the leader of the party, and therefore its candidate for the Presidency of the Spanish Government, such proposals are in line with the presentation of an electoral programme. These proposals outline the measures that he intends to take in response to what are considered to be the main challenges and problems facing the country, including the Catalonian secessionist process, economic growth, and measures to generate employment. There are also messages aimed at the type of political organisation he wants to lead and what changes he advocates. Among them, it is worth noting the increase in participation by party members and the augmentation of internal transparency.

For her part, the most frequently used variable in Sáenz de Santamaría's profile in the second round was support, which accounted for 43.5 % of the messages. It should be recalled that this candidate was the one who obtained the most support from the party members in the vote that closed the first round.

The second most frequently used variable in the case of Casado is support, while in the case of Sáenz de Santamaría it is the presentation of proposals. Two observations can be drawn from this situation. On the one hand, Casado is trying to emphasise the support shown by the delegates for his candidacy by making public their voting decision for 21 July. On the other hand, most of Sáenz de Santamaría's proposals in the second round are focused on projecting an image of party unity by publicising her intention for both candidates to run on a single list.

The third most important variable for both is support for the political party. Both praise the work done by the party during its years in power, as well as the leaders themselves who have served not only the party, but the public interest as well. Nevertheless, the position they had previously held both in the party and at the institutional level influenced their discourse. In Casado's case, among the messages of criticism, there are also posts in which the criticism is directed at the party itself, although it is quite subtle, and there are calls for changes in the party as well (Image 1).

Image 1. Casado's message with content that is critical of his party
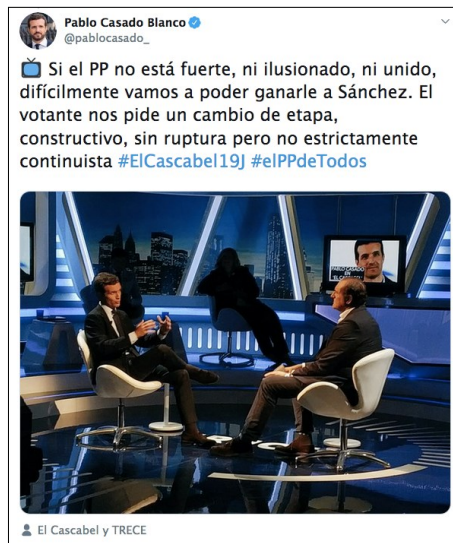
Source: www.twitter.com

In the same vein, Casado tends to publicly display a critical attitude toward Sáenz de Santamaría, as the traditional press reported throughout the campaign (Junquera, 2018). In fact, even on Twitter, the candidate who finally emerged victorious in the primary elections criticised his fellow party member and rival candidate (Image 2).

Image 2. Casado's message of criticism toward his opponent in the primaries

Source: www.twitter.com

With regard to messages of criticism made by Sáenz de Santamaría, even though the total number is higher, their impact is lower, and they always contain exogenous criticism. They are negative messages directed at the management carried out by the Socialist government, as well as criticism of the work of other leaders and political parties, yet they are never directed at the *Partido Popular* or its members.

Finally, there are three variables that are of special interest in relation to the object of study, although their use is not significant, which are those related to campaign events, as well as those that refer to the call for participation and the request for people to vote.

3.3. Analysis of citizen participation and response

In this section, attention is focused on the analysis of the candidates' interaction with citizens/users, in order to identify the response by citizens to the messages disseminated by the candidates. This is done by measuring the use of the three functions that Twitter provides for interaction: replies, retweets, and likes.

In both periods analysed, the instrument most often employed by users in the two profiles is likes, followed by retweets, and then replies, which is in line with the results of previous studies (Machado and Capdevilla, 2016; Izquierdo, 2012). Furthermore, the data show that Casado's profile has a higher level of user interaction involving the three functions available on the 2.0 network.

From 26 June to 5 July, in terms of the average number of messages posted, Casado also outperformed Sáenz de Santamaría. Casado accumulated an average of 437 likes compared to 379.4 for Sáenz de Santamaría; 225.5 retweets compared to 124 for Sáenz de Santamaría; and 89.5 replies on average compared to 41.1 for S. Santamaría (Table 3).

With regard to the second period, the data analysed show the same trend as in the first phase. In terms of the average number of replies per message published, Casado has a higher number, which is 82.8 compared to 32.7 for Sáenz de Santamaría; regarding retweets, Casado has an average of 227.9 compared to 109.7 for his rival in the primaries; and in reference to likes, there are 455.2 for Casado compared to 302.5 for Sáenz de Santamaría.

Table 3. Total number of replies, retweets, and likes to messages posted by candidates during the two campaign periods

	Replies	RTs	Likes
26/06/2018-05/07/2018			
CASADO	13,425 (average 89.5)	33,829 (average 225.5)	65,550 (average 437)
SÁENZ SANTAMARÍA	6,168 (average 41.12)	18,607 (average 124)	51,229 (average 379.47)
	Replies	RTs	Likes
06/07/2018-21/07/2018			
CASADO	13,500 (average 82.8)	37,151 (average 227.9)	74,213 (average 455.2)
SÁENZ DE SANTAMARÍA	5,345 (average 32.7)	17,897 (average 109.7)	38,727 (average 302.5)

Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained on www.twitter.com

It is striking that while in the first period there is no correlation between a higher degree of interaction and a higher level of user support, in the second period there is in fact a correlation between greater interaction and more support. Finally, it is worth highlighting that Sáenz de Santamaría has a preference for using the feature "retweet with comment" provided by Twitter. In this way, two-way feedback is established, or in other words, she receives a message of support and responds to it as well. As a result, from a qualitative perspective, this type of content increases the quality of interaction with the user. This last option is the only one that is not used as a "digital noticeboard" (Castells, 2010, p.12).

In short, the results mainly show the one-way use of Twitter by transferring its offline communication strategy to the online medium, without exploiting the opportunities for interacting with the user.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The empirical study herein reflects the use of Twitter by the two main candidates who competed for the Presidency of the *Partido Popular* during the primary elections held in 2018. The reason for using this social network is to broaden the communication channels through which candidates can disseminate their political messages, thereby attempting to convey an image of closeness and proximity to users.

At the quantitative level, the results have produced two findings. On the one hand, they show more intense use during the first period of analysis. This may be due to the concurrence of two factors: greater competition, and the need to convince the party members that each candidate's own project is best for the future of the Party.

Meanwhile, in the second phase, the competition included only the two candidates analysed, so they had to focus their efforts on winning the hearts and minds of the delegates, who are a much more specific, reduced group of party members. Moreover, they are familiar with both candidates' projects and have previous, long-term affiliations with one of the political branches of the party, all of which has an influence on the position they take.

On the other hand, the results show a clear tendency for candidates to generate their own content, which directly reaches the profiles of users, party members, and supporters. One can observe the willingness of candidates to give importance to the use of social networks, especially Twitter, as part of their political communication strategy in the campaign, which is in line with previous studies (Martínez and Marqués, 2020).

At the qualitative level, the main content of the messages disseminated by the candidates during the primary elections has been framed mostly around three issues.

The first is the presentation of proposals that comprise the political project headed by each candidate. This occurs in two ways: one is related to the internal organisation of the party; the other is connected to the measures they intend to carry out if they reach the level of the National Government, thus confirming H1 of this study. Consequently, use of the social network as a "digital noticeboard" (Castells, 2010, p. 12) can be observed. In other words, the way Twitter is used by the candidates is to limit him or herself to their proposals in order to disseminate them as widely as possible, without generating feedback or the possibility of interaction with their followers. For this reason, the potential of the social network has not been fully exploited in this case, and is limited to one-way communication.

The second issue relates to the publication of messages of support from party members, supporters, and other party affiliates. In this case, it is clear that greater use is made of the options offered by Twitter. A significant percentage of the messages classified in this variable are retweets of messages sent to them by party members/users, which the candidates not only disseminate, but also share by adding a message of their own. As a result, we can see greater involvement by the candidate, as well as a desire to show that she or he has broad social support. A search for the *bandwagon* effect can also be seen, which consists of candidates making their social support visible in order to influence the political behaviour of users, even more so in the absence of surveys that display a rigid, immobile snapshot of electoral support.

The third issue has to do with the limited use of the variable *criticism* in the profiles studied. This may be due to the desire to alleviate one of the main drawbacks posed by this doctrine in relation to the celebration of primary elections as a dynamic

element of internal party democracy. In other words, such criticism introduces the possibility of revealing publicly and visibly the differences, breaches, and internal divisions within the political contingent, which could damage the party's electoral position (Garrido López, 2017; Blanco Valdés, 1998; Boix, 1998). In fact, most of the criticism is directed at other political groupings or leaders of other parties. Nevertheless, Casado does in fact deliver some messages that are critical of his opponent in the primaries, although the tone is non-aggressive. This makes it possible to partially confirm the veracity of H2.

Beyond the most frequently addressed issues, the scarce attention paid to the call for participation and the request for people to vote is significant. This is a common trend in all campaigns, as observed in other research on the use of Twitter in primary elections (Pérez and Nicasio, 2015). As such, it could be inferred that the lack of a direct call for votes is compensated by the indirect request through the presentation of a political project, as this second way could be seen as less aggressive in the eyes of the party members/voters, and it also avoids displaying an image of competition between individuals who belong to the same party. Lastly, regarding interaction with citizens, the results show consistent use by citizens of the tools offered by social networks. This allows them to express their agreement or disagreement with the messages posted by the candidates, which confirms what was stated in H3. In this regard, two observations can be made.

On the one hand, the results show that users prefer interactive instruments that involve less effort (Sabate et al., 2014; Mariani et al., 2013). This is due to the fact that sending retweets and likes are options that only require a click, while commenting requires the user to develop their own discourse in response to the candidate's message. As such, the present study is in line with those that confirm the tendency of users to employ techniques that involve less effort (Arce, et al., 2021; Zamora and Zurutuza, 2015; López et al., 2015), and less interaction as well. However, other studies have shown that both retweets and likes are methods that demonstrate high user involvement (Merino et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, the use of retweets allows the dissemination of messages to be extended beyond the followers of the candidate's official profile. This gives the messages more visibility by multiplying the number of profiles on which they are published. Even when the campaign is directed at a more targeted audience, especially in the second round, the presence and dissemination of the content generated by the candidate is a way of demonstrating that he or she has strong social support. Therefore, this indicates a strong candidacy with a chance for success.

On the other hand, it can be confirmed that the features of this social network have not been fully utilised as a way of approaching supporters, party members, and/or delegates, nor as a means of displaying an image of greater transparency of the process, proximity and trust with supporters (Martínez and Marqués, 2020; Gamir, 2020, among others). Furthermore, it is not exploited sufficiently as a way of making the internal processes of true democratisation visible through greater participation. All of this allows us to verify H4. This confirms that parties and their representatives still have not discovered and capitalised on much of the potential of this network in their strategies for political action and communication, and for reaching out to citizens.

In conclusion, improvement of political communication in the internal democracy of parties would help strengthen the relationship that citizens have with the political system and its institutions, due to the preeminent role that these political formations possess, as recognised by the constitution. This process needs to bring the party closer to citizens not only through conventional media, but also through digital channels, as this is where a large part of social conversation takes place. These new media can help increase the perception of citizens regarding greater transparency and internal democracy, and they can

also assist in expanding the opportunity for users to interact with leaders and their parties. This challenge may prove to be an important step forward in the perception of progress in the quality of our democracy.

5. Acknowledgements

6. Specific contributions from each author

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Conception and design of the work	Marta Pérez-Gabaldón and Blanca Nicasio-Varea
Methodology	Marta Pérez-Gabaldón and Blanca Nicasio-Varea
Data gathering and analysis	Blanca Nicasio-Varea and Marta Pérez-Gabaldón
Discussion and conclusions	Blanca Nicasio-Varea and Marta Pérez-Gabaldón
Writing, formatting, review, and version approval	Marta Pérez-Gabaldón and Blanca Nicasio-Varea

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