

Debates on the airwaves. Electoral talk shows on the radio: comparison between Spain's 1982 and 2019 general elections

Debates en las ondas. Comparativa de los espacios electorales de coloquio en la radio entre las elecciones generales de 1982 y 2019 en España



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Abstract:

Since the freedom of information in 1977, Spanish radio broadcasting has served as a space for opinion and public discussion. In 1980, Cadena Catalana broadcast an electoral debate, “the first of its kind

Resumen:

Desde la libertad informativa de 1977, la radio en España ha servido como espacio de opinión y discusión pública. En 1980, Cadena Catalana emitió un debate electoral, “el primero en su género (...) después de

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(...) after the Civil War" (Munsó, 2006: 204). However, radio electoral debates have hardly been studied at the state level. This research aims to identify and examine the political debates produced by Spanish radios for the 1982 general elections –the first one after the Catalan debate– and November 2019 –the last to date– establishing a comparison as the first approach towards its technical and formal evolution. An analysis sheet was applied based on the data collected in daily newspaper archives *ABC*, *El País*, *Diario 16* and *La Vanguardia* websites and social media profiles from radio networks (Cadena SER, Cadena COPE, Onda Cero and RNE). Two national debate programmes were found, *Tertulias electorales* (1982) and *Debates COPE: El voto útil* (2019), whose moderators participated in semi-structured interviews. The results reveal a contrast in aspects such as the broadcast channel –from analogue to streaming– and audience participation –from the telephone to social networks– although, none of them brought together any candidates for the presidency.

Keywords:

Broadcasting; electoral debates; electoral campaigns; interviews; Spain.

la Guerra Civil" (Munsó, 2006: 204). Sin embargo, apenas se han estudiado los debates electorales radiofónicos a escala estatal. Esta investigación plantea identificar y examinar los debates políticos producidos por radios españolas para las elecciones generales de 1982 –las primeras tras el debate catalán– y noviembre de 2019 –últimas hasta la fecha–, estableciendo una comparativa como primera aproximación hacia su evolución técnica y formal. Se aplicó una ficha de análisis, partiendo de los datos recabados en hemerotecas de ABC, El País, Diario 16 y La Vanguardia, webs y redes sociales de radios (Cadena SER, Cadena COPE, Onda Cero y RNE). Se localizaron dos programas nacionales de debate, Tertulias electorales (1982) y Debates COPE: El voto útil (2019), a cuyos moderadores se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados revelan un contraste en aspectos como el canal de emisión –del analógico al streaming– y la participación de la audiencia –del teléfono a redes sociales–, aunque ninguno de ellos juntó a los candidatos a la Presidencia.

Palabras clave:

Radio; debates electorales; campañas electorales; entrevistas; España.

1. Introduction

The media have been linked to politics since its inception, not only by regulating its activity but also as a “real instrument (organ) of public opinion” (Tönnies, 1979: 264; cit. in Bouza, 1998), capable of having “a considerable influence on citizens’ perception, opinions and behaviour” (Vladislavjević, 2015: 2). Just as the press and the television had been used as a tool for propaganda and mass mobilisation, the radio was too, to the extent that they transformed the lives of governors and the governed. The radio was created in a historical context that accounts for its use as a political instrument; totalitarian ideologies, Nazism and Communism, “made intensive use of radio broadcasting, both to indoctrinate populations and to spread worldwide” (Cotarelo, 2013: 229).

In Spain, the first broadcasting licenses were granted in 1923 by Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, which “established systems of control” to prevent “the broadcasting of news, messages or ideas contrary to official interests” (Ezcurra, 1974: 295). During the Second Republic (1931-1936), the radio enjoyed greater freedom at the expense of becoming an element that “demanded specific dedication” due to the creation of a Ministry of Communications (Balsebre, 2001: 268). After the Civil War, the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco took over the information monopoly for almost four decades through the official Radio Nacional de España (RNE). He exercised tight political control over the radio system (Bustamante, 2013).

Spanish radio changed immensely from 1977 onwards amid the democratic Transition. Private radio stations’ freedom of information and the granting of new FM licenses (Balsebre, 2002: 473-481) increased plurality and modified the relationship between radio and politics. During its heyday, “radio was discovered as a political weapon” (Talaya, 2017: 89) and became a point of reference for information due to its role in the coup d’etat on 23 February 1981 (Díaz, 1992). Furthermore, radio

participation programmes such as *Directo... Directo* (RNE, 1981-1985) incorporated telephone conversations with current affairs personalities (García-Gil, 2021: 396) and used the airwaves to exchange opinions freely. In this sense, election campaigns enabled ideas to be confronted and exposed and also included advertising spaces regulated by law¹, interviews with the candidates² or even debates.

The radio's role as a space for political debate has been the subject of few studies compared to television. Several authors have analysed the nature of televised electoral debates from a political communication perspective (Dader, 1998-1999; Berrocal, 2004; Cantavella *et al.*, 2008; Gallego and Martínez, 2013; García-Marín, 2015) or their evolution from 1993 (Marín, 2019) to 2015 (López-García *et al.*, 2018), through comparisons to the European environment (Rúas-Araujo *et al.*, 2020) or its "symbiosis" with social networks such as Twitter (Ruiz and Bustos, 2017; González-Neira *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, the limited biography on political opinion programmes on radio focuses on talk shows. They have been the subject of monographs (Toral, 1998; Sánchez, 1994), analyses of linguistic uses (González, 2014; Martínez-Costa and Herrera, 2007), the plurality (Abejón, 2013; León and Gómez, 2011), ethics and deontology, among many other approaches (Santamaría, 1992; López, 1996; Moreno, 2002; Angulo, 2006; Colmenarejo, 2019).

Several authors agree that the inception of radio talk shows took place in the programme *La Trastienda* on Cadena SER in 1984 (Sánchez, 1994: 13). However, there are few references to the first radio debate programme, especially an electoral one. Among them, Munsó (2006: 187) highlights the special *Quatre candidates per a una presidència* (*Four candidates for the Presidency*), broadcast by Cadena Catalana³ on 17 March 1980, which brought together four of the main parties' leaders in Catalonia⁴ for the regional elections. Munsó (2006: 204) describes this debate as "the first of its kind (...) after the Civil War".

This article takes that broadcast as the first milestone to propose a new line of analysis, encompassing electoral radio debates from 1980 to the present. However, this approach should not ignore the evolution of the medium, from analogue radio to "cyberradio" (Cebrián, 2008), "post radio" (Ortiz, 2012) or the "radio that can be seen" (Cavia, 2016). The introduction of multimedia logic in conventional radio has given rise to "radiovision" (Palazio, 1999; Gallego Pérez, 2010; López-Vidales, 2011), a radio model that uses podcasting and Internet streaming technologies to offer listeners the chance to watch –and not only listen to– multimedia information, live chats, chat rooms or on-demand radio. This has been influenced by factors such as the impact of television (Pacheco, 2009), the growing use of mobile technology or the Internet, and the search for young audiences (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2011). Listeners' participation in today's radio is managed through social networks, giving rise to "personal radio", "recorded-reproduced", or "created-recreated" by users themselves (Cebrián, 2008: 31-32). Moreover, the multiplicity of listening

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- 1 RNE and the former radio stations of the Movement had to provide the candidates with free advertising slots, as publicly owned media (Herrero and Connolly, 2004: 157).
 - 2 Before the 1977 electoral campaign, RNE broadcast *Diálogos políticos*, a series of interviews, as part of Radiotelevisión Española's policy of bringing "the country's various political leaders to its studios for public appearances" (Fernández Asís (dir.), 1978: 18).
 - 3 Cadena Catalana was a group of broadcasters created in 1978 around Radio España in Barcelona, majority owned by Cadena SER and Rueda de Emisoras Rato (Munsó, 2006: 17).
 - 4 The candidates were Josep Benet (Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya, PSUC), Antón Cañellas (Centristes de Catalunya-Unión de Centro Democrático, CC-UCD), Jordi Pujol (Convergència i Unió, CIU) and Joan Reventós (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya-Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSC-PSOE). The debate was moderated by the journalist Enric Sopena.

channels also gives rise to the concept of “extended radio” (Kischinhevsky, 2017), which presents multiple listening channels; 21st-century radio has the option to extend listening options, as “the web and the app offer alternative signals to the listener”, which are also live (Legorburu *et al.*, 2019: 73). All these elements help to determine how this evolutionary leap has also changed the conception of radio debate since its origins.

1.1. *Theoretical approach to the radio debate genre*

Although this article aims not to investigate the definition of the radio debate, an approach to the theory of radio genres is presented, which is necessary to clarify the object of study. The particularity of the radio medium forced us to adapt to the traditional theory of journalistic genres to better contemplate “the properties of oral communication, the transience of the message and the presence of non-linguistic elements” (Martínez-Costa and Herrera, 2004: 116). Thus, the radio genre is understood as “each of the ways of harmonising the different elements of the radio message- especially the word- in such a way that the resulting structure can be recognised as belonging to a characteristic modality of radio creation and broadcasting” (Merayo, 1992: 173).

The same authors who recognise debates as a radio or audiovisual genre⁵ locate it within the dialogic or appellative genres, “models of representation of reality constructed through the contributions of current affairs’ personalities who seek to enrich the journalistic account” (Martínez-Costa and Díez, 2005: 130). The round table, debate and talk show are grouped under the same umbrella, genres that share the discursive dynamics and the role of the moderator-presenter, framed in modalities such as “the organisation of the polemic” (Prado, 1980; Martí, 1990), “polemic and dialectic attitude” (Martínez-Costa and Díez, 2005: 150; Marta-Lazo and Ortiz (eds.), 2016: 101-102) or “debate” (Merayo, 1992: 176; Rodero, 2005: 229-235; Cebrián, 2007: 128).

The round table brings together “experts or qualified people on a topic of public interest” who contribute “complementary or opposing” points of view (Marta-Lazo and Ortiz (eds.), 2016: 107), while the debate and the talk show aim to confront ideas, each with its distinctive features. The literature attributes qualities such as periodisation, regular participants at the debates-panellists-, a relaxed nature, the possible participation of listeners and the alternation of topics influenced by current affairs (Merayo, 1992; Marta-Lazo and Ortiz (eds.), 2016; Santos, 2003). However, taking the aforementioned authors as a reference, the most common characterisation of radio debate includes:

- several participants, limited in number -who can go individually or in two opposing groups- who represent opposing stances;
- the impartial presenter-moderator, in charge of maintaining the rules of the debate, respectfully but encouraging controversy;
- the basic structure composed of the presentation of the topic and the participants, the presentation of arguments and each speaker’s conclusion;
- the times set in advance for each debater may be strict or flexible;
- live broadcasting;

5 Even, the Cadena SER stylebook recognises debate as both a radio subgenre -“dialogue between two or more people who hold opposing stances”- and as a programme format, including the particular case of “face-to-face” between two people (Cadena SER, 2017: 82; 110-111).

– and the expertise on a previously agreed upon topic of interest and controversy.

The expansion of radio talk shows contrasts the scarce treatment of debates to the extent that it is considered a genre that is only “for television” (García de Castro, 2014: 43). Cadena SER (2017: 110) highlights in its stylebook, “unlike the talk show or round table, debates do not usually have a regular space in the programming [...]” This shows the exceptional nature of debate programmes, which explains why special broadcasts are reserved for significant events such as elections. Although debates are not only reserved for politicians, this genre is shown as an ideal vehicle in an electoral context due to contrasting ideas intrinsically, which allows for “developing new proposals to all kinds of problems posed by society” (Martínez-Costa and Díez, 2005: 144).

1.2. Televised electoral debates in Spain

The lack of study on the radio debate contrasts with televised debates, which have become a popular event in electoral campaigns, despite their brief history in Spain (Hernández-Herrarte and Zamora-Martínez, 2020). Regarding the debates between the leaders of electoral lists⁶, the first face-to-face debate was broadcast on Antena 3 on 24 May 1993 between Felipe González (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) and José María Aznar (Partido Popular, PP). A week later, both participated in a second debate on Telecinco. After 15 years without electoral debates⁷, in the 2008 elections, two debates were broadcast between the candidates Mariano Rajoy (PP) and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE), which brought together 13 and 11.9 million viewers, respectively (Barlovento, 2019a) and sparked a new interest to date in the study of television debates (García-Marín *et al.*, 2018). In 2011, the same format was repeated with two PP-PSOE debates, although this time, only one event was held, pitting Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba and Mariano Rajoy against each other.

The renouncement of the two-party system, consolidated in 2015 with the rise of Podemos and Ciudadanos (Martín Jiménez *et al.*, 2017: 63), altered the usual dynamic of these debates by opening up space for more candidates. In the 2015 general elections, two types of debates were combined: a four-way debate between Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos, C’s) and the vicepresident of the government, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría (PP); and a week later, the usual face-to-face debate, this time between Pedro Sánchez and Mariano Rajoy.

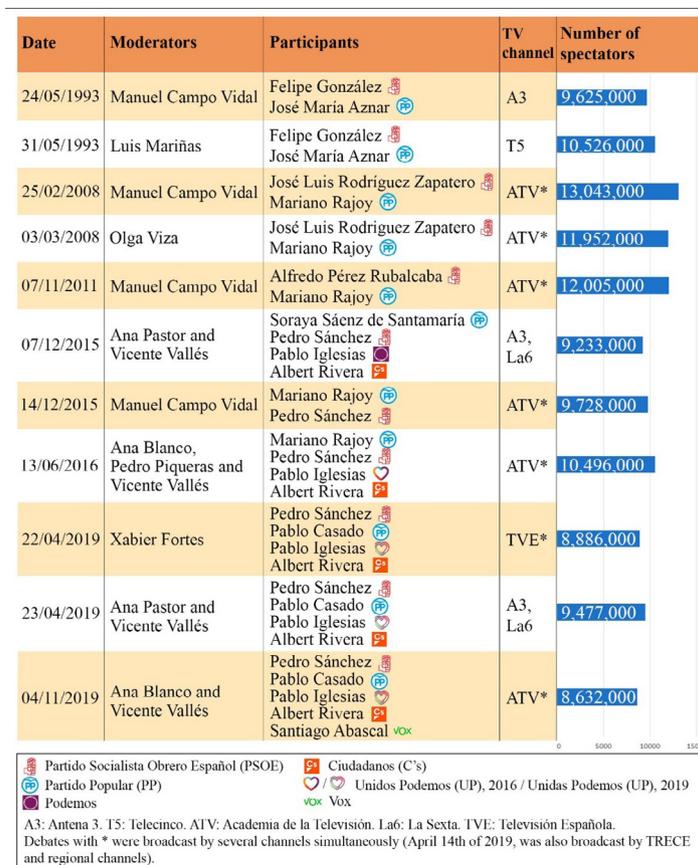
The 2016 elections featured a single televised political debate where, for the first time, the four candidates with the most significant representation in the Congress: Mariano Rajoy (PP), Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Albert Rivera (C’s) and Pablo Iglesias (Unidos Podemos, UP) took part. Its broadcast meant breaking away from the classic two-way debate. Since then, in the last electoral campaigns in April and November 2019, the televised debates have been organised with all the candidates in mind. Thus, two four-way debates were planned for the April elections in which Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Casado, Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera took part. In the 2019 repeat election, a single television debate was held on 4 November, with the five most important leaders of the electoral lists in terms of voting intentions: Casado, Sánchez, Iglesias, Rivera, and Santiago Abascal as a newcomer (VOX).

6 Although they have been studied less, Spanish television has also broadcast electoral debates with more than two candidates –in two editions of *La clave* (TVE) in 1982, but without Felipe González or Adolfo Suárez (Berdón-Prieto and García-Gil, 2020: 348-349)–, with no leaders of the electoral lists –such as Narcís Serra (PSOE)-Miquel Roca (CiU) in the 1989 general elections– or others in municipal and regional elections (Luengo, 2011: 84).

7 The 1996, 2000 and 2004 general elections did not have any election debates with presidential candidates.

Since 1993 11 electoral debates have been televised in Spain featuring the presidential candidates. The evolution of these debates (Image 1) shows the usual presence of the journalist moderators, the multiplicity of channels interested in broadcasting them and the high level of interest they generate.

Image 1. Electoral debates between candidates for the Presidency of the Government televised in Spain



Source: created by the authors based on González-Neira *et al.* (2020), and Barlovento Comunicación (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) e IPMark (2019)

1.3. Objectives and hypotheses

This research aims to identify and examine the electoral debates that Spanish radio produced prior to the general campaigns of 1982 and November 2019. Both correspond to different political contexts:

- The 28 October 1982 elections, called for by the president of the government at the time, Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, gave the absolute majority to Felipe González’s PSOE. These elections are “considered (...) as the definitive sign of the end of the Transition” (Tranche, 2016: 113).
- In contrast, the 2019 10 November elections were a repeat election. The PSOE won the previous elections on 28 April. Still, the incumbent government presided by Pedro Sánchez called the polls again, given its inability to obtain sufficient support for the investiture. For this extraordinary situation, the electoral campaign was reduced to eight days.

These two events have been chosen as a way of approaching this field, which provides guidance on how the evolution of the radio medium may have affected the performance of radio debate. Considering the first electoral debate (1980) as the antecedent of Cadena Catalana (Munsó, 2006), we start from this to establish two extremes of time to compare the first and the last general elections since then. We include debates between presidential candidates and between representatives of political parties to broaden the field of study.

The general objective is specified in three specific objectives.

- SO1. To find out the format of the electoral debates broadcasted on radio, particularly their duration, topics, guests and participation.
- SO2. To explore how the debates broadcast throughout Spain developed through the role of moderators and the audience.
- SO3. To compare the possible similarities and differences between the 1982 and 2019 state broadcast debates with an impact on the influence of digital radio.

Based on these objectives, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. In the 1982 and 2019 elections, the radio brought together the heads of electoral lists or candidates for the Presidency to debate, given their obvious public interest.
- H2. The debates produced in 1982 led to more active and direct audience participation than those of 2019.
- H3. Broadcasting localised debates in 2019 mimicked more television features than in 1982, in line with today’s “radio that can be seen”.

2. Method

A quantitative analysis (content analysis) and a qualitative analysis (semi-structured interview) were carried out to address the objectives and respond to the hypotheses. By combining these methods, the results could be compared more easily, guaranteeing the reliability of the research as a whole (Martínez, 2005; Varela, 2014).

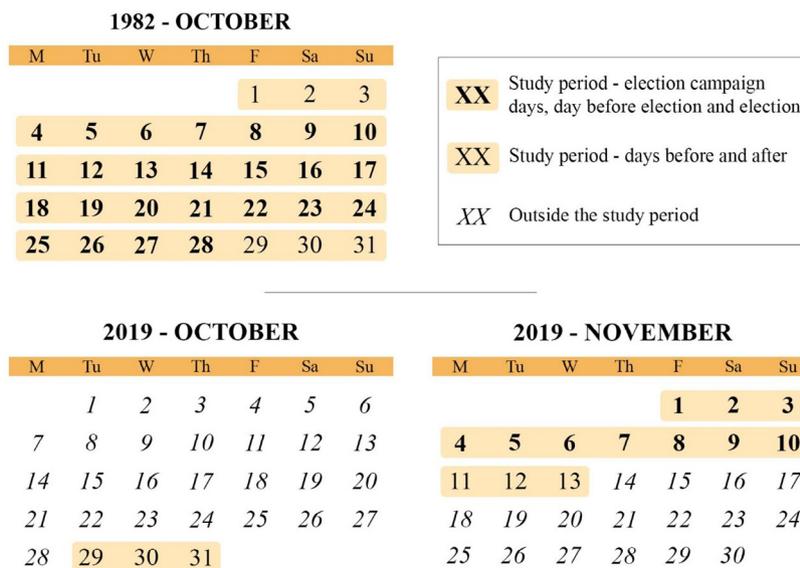
Firstly, the content analysis method was used because of its ability to examine communicative messages systematically, objectively and quantitatively (Berelson, 1952; Wimmer and Dominick, 2010; Riffe et al., 1998). As the two periods are so far apart, the search for information to form the research corpus has been adapted to each study period. For the compilation of data on the 1982 debates, the primary sources used were the newspaper archives of three general newspapers in Madrid (*ABC*, *El País* and *Diario 16*) and one in Barcelona (*La Vanguardia*), which were selected because of the wide circulation and proven

relevance as opinion shapers (Reguero, 2018: 16-17). In addition, the search was completed with the weekly magazine *Tele-Radio*, RTVE's official medium. The press search covers news or opinions of the radio coverage of the general elections and the advertising spaces broadcasters hired to promote their special programming.

For the 2019 elections, searches were carried out in the digital newspaper libraries of *ABC* and *El País* and on radio station's websites, using key words and tags such as "radio", the name of the broadcasters and "general elections". In particular, the four most listened-to general radio stations at the time, according to the Estudio General de Medios (EGM), were consulted: Cadena SER, Cadena COPE, Onda Cero and RNE⁸; in addition, the publications related to electoral debates on the Twitter profiles of the four radio stations within the time frame analysed were also examined.

The study period includes the campaign, reflection and voting days of each election call, plus the three working days before and after. Therefore, in the first case, they run from 1 to 31 October 1982; in the second, they cover 29 October to 13 November 2019 (Image 2). The 2019 electoral rerun reduced the number of campaign days, so the second period is shorter than the first.

Image 2. Research study periods



Source: created by the authors

⁸ According to the second wave of the 2019 EGM, Cadena SER had 3,966,000 daily listeners; Cadena COPE, 2,926,000 listeners; Onda Cero, 1,807,000; and RNE, 1,174,000 (AIMC, 2019).

All the data have been used to complete an original analysis comprising three categories and fourteen variables (Table 1). The first block focuses on the broadcast's recording data, considered a fundamental dimension when coding; the second refers to the periodicity of the broadcast –“regular content”– is understood as that which is broadcast regularly and has several broadcasts. At the same time, “specials” are aired on a one-off basis without any expected continuity. Finally, the third section deals with formal and descriptive aspects. The book of variables was developed using the five characteristics that Sánchez Aranda (2005) considers essential to correctly define the categories of any code: “mutual exclusion” allows us to differentiate the variables formulated: “homogeneity”, to establish standard criteria when selecting each sample unit: “relevance”, to identify the best variables for analysis; “clarity”, to eliminate doubts about the term used among different people, and “productivity”, to think about what the most enriching aspects for establishing conclusions are.

Table 1. Analysis sheet

BROADCAST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Broadcaster or radio station -Starting day -Start time -Duration -Programme title
PERIODICITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Regular or special content -One or more broadcasts/transmissions
FORMAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Theme(s) -Guests -Moderator -Place -Public presence at the debate -Listener participation -Others

Source: created by the authors

On the other hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the moderators of the debates found –and, therefore, limited to the radio station's professionals that produced this genre–. This technique makes it possible to collect data on the object of study in real-time and to introduce new questions that had not been contemplated in the script to clarify terms, ambiguities and formalisms with the interlocutor (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Hesse and Leavy, 2011; Díaz-Bravo *et al.*, 2013). Its flexible nature has contributed to it being the most common method in social research, guaranteeing a desired level of depth.

Once the hemerographic search had been completed and the electoral debate programmes broadcasted at the national level had been identified –in line with the second specific objective and the verification of the second hypothesis– their moderators

were interviewed: the journalists Miguel Ángel Nieto González⁹ (*Tertulias electorales* in Antena 3 de Radio, 1982) and Antonio Herráiz Ayuso¹⁰ (*Debates COPE: El voto útil*, 2019). The interviews were conducted via telephone on 2 and 9 November 2022, and the questionnaire script was organised into three sections. The first focused on the management and previous production of the broadcast; the second dealt with the technical questions of the format, and the third addressed the development and result, highlighting the role of the moderator and the listeners.

The *Debates COPE...* of 2019 were available on YouTube and viewed beforehand; however, it was impossible to locate recordings of the 1982 *Tertulias electorales*. The absence of sound recordings is a limitation of radio research, as until the end of the 20th century, “broadcasters (...) used to get rid of most of their sound archives after the legal period” of preservation (Marcos *et al.*, 2018: 665-666).

3. Results

In this section, the results obtained from the content analysis are presented first, followed by the results of the interviews.

3.1. Results of the content analysis

3.1.1. October 1982 elections

The 1982 October election campaign gave rise to numerous special programmes. Among them, a prominent presence of debates and colloquiums on local or regional radio stations has been identified. One example was *Especial elecciones 82 (Election Special 82)*, on Radio España de Madrid, from 4 October to 26 October, Monday to Friday, from 6 to 7pm. This “informative news programme”, with 17 “colloquiums”, invited the political parties represented in Madrid and occasionally, other parties “to be designated for each programme, enriching its content” (ABC, 1982a: 72). Each day, it dealt with an in-depth topic, from health and education to culture and the environment¹¹. Daniel Vindel moderated these debates, which were prepared by eight people headed by its director Fulgencio Sánchez¹². The advertising for the special (Image 3) appealed to the listeners as they could participate by asking candidates questions on the telephone.

9 In 1982, Miguel Ángel Nieto directed the news programme *El Primero de la mañana* on Antena 3 Radio.

10 In 2019, Antonio Herráiz directed the news programme *Mediodía COPE* on Cadena COPE.

11 The “discussion” dealt with the following themes: presentation (days 4 and 5): culture (day 6), interior and public order (day 7), international relations (8), territorial administration-autonomy (11), environment and quality of life-ecology (12), health and social security (13), education and university (14), transport, tourism, and communications (15), Armed Forces (18), public works and housing (19), work (20), economy and the Treasury (21), agriculture, fishing and food (22), justice, abortion and divorce (25) and summary and closure (day 26) (*Diario 16*, 1982: 8).

12 Information provided to this research by Francisco Vela Teruel, editor of the radio station in 1982 (F. Vela, personal communication, 9 November 2022).

Image 3. Advertising for the Election Special 82 (Radio España de Madrid)

Source: *Diario 16* (21/10/1982)

Cadena Catalana scheduled several debates during the campaign. Its nightly news programme *La Nit (The Night)* included a high profile face-to-face between the leading candidates in Barcelona for CiU, Miquel Roca, and the PSC-PSOE, Ramón Obiols, co-organised with the newspaper *La Vanguardia* to close the campaign on the 26th. Txema Alegre and Enric Sopena moderated this hour-and-a-half debate in front of an audience at the Ritz Hotel in Barcelona. However, the audience's interventions were "dismissed" (*La Vanguardia*, 1982b: 3-4). There were four sections (alliances and post-electoral agreements, economic proposals, Catalonia and cultural policy), followed by a round of conclusions. The chronicle of the co-organising newspaper praised the "high level, civilised" and "free-flowing" debate (*La Vanguardia*, 1982b: 3-4).

Amid the campaign, an *ABC* journalist even referred to the "syndrome of calling for public debates", whose "largest scenario" seemed to occur in the Basque country (Martín Nogales, 1982: 35). Cadena SER's circuit of Basque radio stations broadcast a debate organised by the news agency Agencia EFE, between the candidates of the basque nationalist Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV), Xavier Arzallus, and the socialist Partido Socialista de Euskadi (PSE-PSOE), Enrique Múgica, on 23 October. This debate lasted an hour and was covered by the national press (Unzueta, 1982: 25; Pagola, 1982: 33; *Diario 16*, 1982: 48).

The leading national networks did not match this density of debates. The only notable example was on Antena 3 de Radio. Shortly after its first broadcasts in the Spring of 1982 (Barrera and Dobón, 2015: 184), the station launched its *Tertulias electorales (Electoral Talks)* on 9 September, a month before the campaign, hosted by the journalist Miguel Ángel Nieto. The aim of the almost two-hour programme was "to clarify the political panorama and provide information to the listener-voter (...) to go to the polls knowing what each political party has to offer" (*El País*, 1982a: 51), which is why, despite its title "tertulias" (talk shows), the participation of different electoral options could make it more of a debate. Its press advertising used the faces of the five primary candidates for the Presidency of the Government: Adolfo Suárez, Santiago Carrillo, Manuel Fraga, Felipe González and Landelino Lavilla under the slogan "Listen, compare and then vote" (Image 4).

Image 4. *Tertulias electorales* Advertising (Antena 3 de Radio)



Source: ABC (13/10/1982)

The two channels with the most significant coverage and audience, Radio Nacional and Cadena SER, provided special coverage of the elections, interviewing candidates and through listeners' participation (*El País*, 1982b: 55; *ABC*, 1982b: 115; *La Vanguardia*, 1982a: 10). However, this research did not locate any national debates on RNE's or SER's schedules. Even so, the absence of a televised debate prompted a public proposal to transfer it to the radio: the press picked up rumours of a possible live debate on Cadena SER with an audience present. *Diario 16* even reported that the socialist leader's proposal, Felipe González was to hold it "in a stadium, in front of 20 000 people" (García Rivas, 1982: 13), but in the end, it did not take place.

3.1.2 November 2019 elections

The programming schedules of national radio stations offered slight variation during the 2019 November election campaign, with hardly any alterations compared to a regular week. The contents of SER, COPE, Onda Cero and RNE related to the elections focused on their usual programmes, except for the special programmes during the election. Apart from the day of the vote, the only relevant difference was the entire broadcast of one of the two nationally televised debates: the five-way debate organised by the Television Academy (Academia de la Televisión) on 4 November. The four radio stations broadcast the debate during their nightly news programme *Hora 25* (SER), *La Linterna* (COPE), *La Brújula* (Onda Cero) and *24 Horas* (RNE). However, they extended their usual duration with a subsequent analysis table, reducing or eliminating their midnight programmes (Image 5)¹³. This was not the case with the seven-way debate organised by Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE) on 1 November, which was only broadcast by RNE's news channel, Radio 5 (RTVE.es, 2019).

13 Cadena SER and Onda Cero eliminated their sports programmes (*El Larguero* and *El Transistor*) for one day. Cadena COPE extended *La Linterna* until 0:56 and then broadcast a reduced version of *El Partidazo de COPE*.

Image 5. Hora 25, Cadena COPE, La Brújula and RNE Tweets, during the rebroadcasting of the debate on 4/11/2019



Source: @hora25, @cope, @BrujulaOndaCero and @rne (www.twitter.com). Created by the authors

However, there was one exception during the pre-campaign. Cadena COPE organised *Debates COPE: El voto útil* (COPE Debates: The Useful Vote), a series of four meetings moderated by journalist Antonio Herráiz. Each edition centred on a specific theme, reflected in its titles “Territorial Crisis” (10 October), “Pensions” (17 October), “Education” (24 October) and “Spain facing the economic challenge” (31 October). They were produced live weekly, on the four Thursdays before the start of the campaign. They lasted between 1:14 and 1:21 hours and were attended by PSOE, PP, C’s, UP and Vox representatives. However, none of the parties presented their candidates for the Presidency of the Government (Table 2).

Table 2. Candidates present in the *Debates COPE: El voto útil*

	Territorial Crisis (10/10/2019)	Pensions (17/10/2019)	Education (24/10/2019)	Economy* (31/10/2019)
PSOE	Patxi López	Mercè Perea	Mariluz M. Seijo	Daniel Fuentes
PP	Eduarne Uriarte	Jaime de Olano	Sandra Moneo	Mario Garcés
C's	Edmundo Val	Sergio del Campo	Marta Martín	Marcos de Quinto
UP	Roberto Uriarte	Yolanda Díaz	Sofía Castañón	Nacho Álvarez
Vox	Jorge Buxadé	Macarena Olona	Joaquín Robles	Jorge Buxadé
* The full name of the fourth debate was "Spain, facing the economic challenge"				

Source: COPE (2019a; 2019b; 2019c). Created by the authors

The four debates were broadcast in their entirety via streaming video on the website www.cope.es and its YouTube channel, reducing its presence on radio and the group's television, TRECE, to a follow-up "in different connections" (COPE.es, 2019).

3.2. Comparison between *Tertulias electorales* (1982) and *Debates COPE: El voto útil* (2019)

The results described above show the broadcasting of two debate programmes organised by radio stations for a national audience: Antena 3 de Radio's *Tertulias electorales* (1982) and *Debates COPE: El voto útil* (2019). The interviews with their moderators provide greater detail on the approach, format and final result, allowing for comparison. However, both productions' different political media and technical contexts must be considered.

3.2.1. Broadcasting channel

The most apparent difference between the two debates is the broadcasting channel. While *Tertulias...* were broadcast on Antena 3 de Radio's FM signal, incorporating video in *Debates COPE...* transformed their output to suit their multi-track broadcast, even though the radio station, COPE, was used as the reference. According to the experience of its moderator:

You were playing with the languages of each medium. The proposals [of each candidate] are common; it does not matter if you tell them on the radio or TV, but the approach you have to take as a medium is to open up so that the language reaches the three channels through which you are sending the message (A. Herráiz, personal communication, 9 November 2022).

In addition, the moderator highlights that it was "the first time in the history of Cadena COPE" that a debate of this type was held on radio, television and the Internet. The COPE broadcast included numerous television resources, such as graphics, signs,

on-screen timers and introductory videos. The position of the debaters was drawn from a lottery, as is the case in television debates. The order of the interventions at the beginning and end of each broadcast was also decided at random.

3.2.2. *Venue and guests*

The location of the debate poses another notorious difference. The *Debates COPE...* took place on the set of TRECE television in Madrid. In the case of Antena 3, the *Tertulias electorales* had several venues: from Monday to Thursday, they took place in a restaurant in Madrid. In contrast, on Fridays, they took place in other cities. In these editions, space was also given to nationalist or regional parties. The moderator, Miguel Ángel Nieto, even recalls a speech given in Catalan for Spain:

When we arrived in Barcelona, some parties demanded to speak in Catalan (...). Then, on the air, I told them, “Gentlemen, (...) you have every right to do so. But this is a national radio station. So the people of Catalonia are going to understand you perfectly well. But the people in Cádiz might not. And neither will those in Soria (...). You will figure out where you want to send the message”. And one of them started speaking in Catalan, and he realised it did not make sense on a national programme and went on to speak in Spanish (M.Á. Nieto, personal communication, 2 November 2022).

In the case of the *Debates COPE: el voto útil* from 2019, the choice of guests was subject to the prior electoral representation of the five most voted parties at a national level. The *Tertulias electorales* on Antena 3 and *Debates COPE...* proposed the same thematic logic: to dedicate each day to a central issue, with specialists chosen by each party. In both cases, the moderators of the two shows claim that the logic of the format ruled out bringing together the candidates for the Presidency of the Government, which would have required another special approach. Even so, in the case of Antena 3, Nieto recalls that production efforts were made to bring together all the leaders in a special talk show. Still, incompatibilities in their agendas made it “impossible”

3.2.3. *Format and the moderator’s role*

The rigidity of the debate also varied between the two cases. The Antena 3 debate had an electoral talk show organised by the *ABC* newspaper in 1977 as its precedent, in which Miguel Ángel Nieto had already acted as a moderator¹⁴. Five years later, Nieto repeated his role, this time for radio, as an intermediary between the audience’s questions and the politicians’ turns to speak: The talk show was separated into three phases: questions from the listeners, on the telephone, [and] questions from the live audience; answers from the candidates; and counter-answers from the candidates themselves. Then they had two minutes per answer and one minute per counter-answer. And I, who was the moderator, had a bell [to mark the end of the turn] (...) At the beginning, this was very shocking, but there came a time when the bell was no longer needed (M.Á. Nieto, personal communication, 2 November 2022).

Thus, the audience’s questions were an essential part of the programme, leaving the role of the moderator as a referee to give the floor and control the time. Nieto reaffirms that “the moderator does not have to give an opinion, (...) they have to

14 The debates on *ABC* en 1977 included the participation of the politicians Manuel Fraga (Alianza Popular) and Alfonso Guerra (PSOE) (*ABC*, 1977: 24).

moderate". These qualities –agreed times, impartial moderator, non-regular participants, specific topics– thus confirm that, despite its name, the programme *Tertulias electorales* formally included the characteristics of the radio debate genre.

In 2019, *Debates COPE...* followed a more flexible formula: the first and last interventions were the only ones with a time limit, and both had one minute. The rest of the debate did not follow a fixed time, so the candidates had no time limit. A stopwatch installed on the set allowed the guests to see the sum of minutes and seconds that each had spoken to compare who had participated more or less. These rules gave the moderator the function of distributing the speakers' turns to compensate for the interventions, as Herráiz himself explains:

I was playing with that balance according to the times that I was looking at. (...) We obviously do not have set times, such as a debate on [public broadcaster] Radio Nacional. We do not have to play according to the representativeness of each group, we are a private radio station, and we do not have that obligation. So the time was set equally for everyone (A. Herráiz, personal communication, 9 November 2022).

The moderator's objective is to "confront ideas" and raise problems "so that each guest could put their party's solutions on the table". Moreover, the debate format included pre-recorded questions from COPE and TRECE presenters, such as Carlos Herrera, Ángel Expósito, Ana Samboal and Antonio Jiménez (COPE, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c).

3.2.4. Audience participation

The live debates allowed audience participation, although the interaction channels also changed in line with the times. In the 1982 *Tertulias electorales*, both the audience present and the telephone listeners could ask their questions, and there was a specific time within the format to ask them. In contrast, the audience of the *Debates COPE...* in 2019 could send their questions via the hashtag #DebatesCOPE or WhatsApp. In this case, the moderator read out a selection of questions at the end of the debate. There was no specific time to answer them, but candidates were invited to do so during the final turn or "golden minute".

On the other hand, while the Antena 3 programmes allowed the public to enter with an invitation in the debate room itself, those produced by COPE set up a second space, isolated from the set, so that an invited audience could watch the programme. The audience of the *Debates COPE...* included the presence of "sympathisers" of the five political parties, who intervened on two occasions during the programme. The organisers intended to create an alternative scenario that would break away from the monotony of the format, according to the moderator:

It was chosen as a dynamising element (...). Another different image, one that was not so corseted, with five men and women sitting at a table. Another perspective (...) and, in principle, another language (...). The result was that these supporters were part of the party teams (A. Herráiz, personal communication, 9 November 2022).

During the debates, the "sympathisers" answered questions related to the day's topic, although they reproduced the ideology of their related parties. Only in one case was there an interaction with the candidates, which led to a round of allusions for the Ciudadanos representative Marcos de Quinto (COPE, 2019d).

The similarities and differences between the two programmes analysed are summarised in the following comparison (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of the *Tertulias electorales* (1982) and the *Debates COPE: El voto útil* (2019)

	<i>Tertulias electorales</i> (1982)	<i>Debates COPE...</i> (2019)
Radio station	Antena 3 de Radio	COPE (<i>online</i> broadcast)
Start date	9 September	10 October
Time	20:15	18:00
Periodicity	Daily (from Monday to Friday)	Weekly (Thursday)
No. of editions	No data found*	Four
Content	Special programme	Special programme
Duration	1:45 hours	Between 1:14 y 1:21 hours
Theme(s)	Specialised	Specialised
Guests	Specialists selected by each party	Specialists selected by each party
Moderator	Miguel Ángel Nieto	Antonio Herráiz
Place	Restaurant Mayte Commodore, Madrid (Monday to Thursday); other Antena 3 stations (Friday)	TRECE set, Madrid
Public present	Yes	No
Participation	Yes (telephone and face-to-face)	Yes (social networks and WhatsApp)
*Antenna 3's programming, as reported by ABC, includes <i>Tertulias electorales</i> until the week after the vote; assuming it maintains its regular broadcasting until then, the total would be around 35 broadcasts.		

Source: created by the authors

Both moderators remember this experience as satisfactory and pioneering at certain times: the Antena 3's *Tertulias electorales* because of their unfolding and format, which were different for radio, and the *Debates COPE...*, due to their integrating nature within the channels of their media group.

4. Conclusions

Since Spanish radio first broadcast its first electoral debates, this research has shown how general elections' radio coverage has been affected by the emergence and resizing of televised debates as central elements of the campaigns. Thus, those relative to October 1982 and November 2019 reveal substantial differences.

The 1982 general election campaign did not feature a face-to-face debate between the main presidential candidates in front of the television cameras. Instead, the radio stations gave space to debates –without the leaders of the national party lists– and thematic programmes, which were usually broadcast during the official campaign period but sometimes even began a month earlier, as was the case with Antena 3's *Tertulias electorales*. The special programming was broadcast outside the regular radio schedule; the public was invited to be present during the broadcast and was even allowed to ask the candidates questions directly, although they had to follow rigid rules regarding speaking time. Citizen participation on the radio was presented as a possibility of broadening public debate, visibility and recognition of different groups' and individuals' needs, connecting with the phenomenon of the radio-participation characteristic of the Transition.

In contrast, the role of the radio as a place for debate was rather more secondary in 2019. Except for the day of the vote, the four general radio stations with the largest audiences (SER, COPE, Onda Cero and RNE) did not provide special programmes that were out of their usual schedules; perhaps they were conditioned by the brevity of the campaign or the electoral rerun. The prominence of the televised electoral debates was noticeable, as the four radio stations did alter their schedules during the campaign and the debate organised by the Television Academy. In the pre-campaign period, Cadena COPE organised its own *Debates COPE: El voto útil* with full online broadcasting, on video and limiting its presence on air to connections or summaries, with hardly any alteration to its Hertzian programming. The format of *Debates COPE...* sought greater dynamism, with flexible time for interventions by each candidate and the interventions of “sympathisers”, although apart from this, audience participation had a minor impact on the broadcast.

The two primary case studies reveal several differences and some striking similarities. The choice of specialised topics in both examples allowed the audience to learn about the main parties' proposals with representatives specialising in the day's issue. On the other hand, the moderators adopted an impartial role. However, Antonio Herráiz (COPE) had a broader scope of action than Miguel Ángel Nieto (Antena 3) due to the flexibility of times agreed between candidates. The main contrast is between the broadcasting channel. While in 1982, only analogue radio broadcasting was possible, the debates organised by COPE were broadcast entirely by streaming, taking advantage of visual elements from television (hypothesis 3 verified). Even so, the audience's participation during the *Tertulias electorales* was much more direct and unfiltered, allowing for telephone and audience questions on the live set (H2 verified). Nevertheless, none of the debates managed to bring together the candidates for the Presidency of the Government (H1 not corroborated).

Both the delimitation of the field of study –which left out the debates on other national or regional radio channels during the 2019 elections– and the absence of sources –sound archives of the 1982 broadcasts– are the limits of this research. However, this article is a starting point to address the evolution of radio coverage in other general elections and to reflect, in particular, on its present and future coexistence with televised debates, for example, by exploiting its digital presence or claiming participation as a differentiating element. As a future line of research, we propose to analyse how Spanish radio

has transformed its programmatic approach to the upcoming campaigns and the degree to which television has modified or limited the relevance of political debate on the radio.

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