Negative campaigning. Comparative analysis of the hate speech broadcast by Catalonian political leaders on their official Twitter accounts and television

Negatividad en procesos electorales. Análisis comparativo del discurso de odio difundido por los líderes políticos catalanes en su cuenta oficial de Twitter y en televisión

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Abstract:

This research aims to shed light on the phenomenon of negative campaigning in the current Spanish political and media landscape. The main objective is to find significant variations in hate speech according to the degree of control that politicians are able to exert in diverse media. To this end, an analysis has been carried out regarding the totality of criticism that Catalonian political leaders issued in the three televised election debates, as well as in the original publications of their official twitter accounts during the Catalonian election campaign of 14 February 2021. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to confirm the presence of determinants related to ideology and posturing in the government prior to the elections analysed, as well as in the broadcast of those attacks. This study has used a quantitative-qualitative content analysis methodology with a coding sheet composed of five variables

Resumen:

La investigación pretende arrojar luz sobre el fenómeno de las campañas negativas en el panorama político y mediático español actual. Con el objetivo principal de encontrar diferencias significativas en los discursos de odio según el grado de control que pueden ejercer los actores políticos en los diversos medios de comunicación, se han analizado todas las críticas que los líderes políticos catalanes han emitido en los tres debates electorales televisados y en las publicaciones originales de su cuenta oficial de Twitter durante la campaña electoral catalana del 14 de febrero de 2021. Adicionalmente, se ha pretendido demostrar la existencia de condicionantes ideológicos y de posicionamiento en el gobierno previo a las elecciones analizadas también en la difusión de esos ataques. El trabajo ha empleado una metodología de análisis de contenido cuantitativo-cualitativo utilizando una ficha de codificación

related to analysing the negative campaigning. The most significant findings not only show a much more critical tone used by candidates in the debates when compared to the microblogging network, but they also highlight the digital platform as a means of discrediting the personal traits of political opponents to a greater extent.

Keywords:

Negative campaigning; electoral debates; social networks; political leaders; Catalonian elections.

compuesta por cinco variables relativas al estudio de la campaña negativa. Los resultados más relevantes no solo demuestran una mayor entonación de críticas por parte de los candidatos en los debates que en la red de microblogging, sino que sitúan a la plataforma digital como un medio para desprestigiar en mayor medida los rasgos personales de los adversarios políticos.

Palabras clave:

Campaña negativa; debates electorales; redes sociales; líderes políticos; elecciones catalanas.

1. Introduction

The special features offered by the Internet in the current hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), "characterised by the coexistence of traditional and digital media" (Gamir et al., 2022, p. 2), has enabled the intensification of hate speech (Bustos-Martínez et al., 2019) by different politicians through applications such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. As such, during electoral campaigns, leaders use the communication tools at their disposal to build a discourse in order to undermine their rivals.

The use of continuous criticism and attacks is closely related to the populist communication style. The establishment of populist parties on the current political scene has led to the rise of increasingly emotional political language infused with "anger", "fear", "resentment" and, above all, contempt of political opponents (Bucy, et al., 2020, p. 640).

In any case, negative campaigns are a "distinctive" element in today's competitive "electioneering" (Nai and Maier, 2020, p. 3). Ever since the first truly negative electoral advertisement was broadcast on US television in the 1960s, known as the Daisy Spot (Jiménez, 2011), attacks between politicians have become a global phenomenon during campaigns (Sullivan and Sapir, 2012). Despite academic disagreement on the possible social effects of negative campaigning on the electorate, the literature addressing this anomaly confirms that politicians in contemporary Western democracies have significantly increased their use of these tactics (Russmann, 2017; Geer, 2006).

However, there is only a scant amount of research that attempts to understand the variation in the nature of the attacks, depending on the medium in which the politician finds him or herself during the delivery of the criticism, as well as the factors that explain the use of negative discourse in election campaigns (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010; Walter and de Brug, 2013; Dolezal, et al., 2016; Russmann, 2017). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyse the conduct used in the attacks carried out by the main candidates for the presidency of the Catalonian government during the 14 February 2021 election campaign in two significantly different media: television and Twitter. The aim is to determine the communication channel on which politicians criticise with more intensity, as well as the direction, typology, and scale of the reproaches they express. In addition to this main objective, the research also aims to determine the ideological and positioning factors within the government prior to the elections that have encouraged the exchange of pejorative messages between political opponents.

The decision to focus on the elections of the Catalonian Autonomous Region is due to the continuous presence in the public debate in recent years of the "predominance of Catalonian nationalism" (Díaz, 2021, p. 2). The second reason is that the voting decision

is not exclusively subordinated to the classic left-right concept, but is also influenced by a feeling of independent identity, which allows us to obtain a wider range of results in the study of political negativity. The third reason why the Catalonian plebiscite has been chosen is because events such as the 1 October referendum and the application of Article 155 of the Constitution (March, 2020), place the Catalonian political scenario in "a highly polarised situation" (López-Pereira, et al., 2019, p. 230), which is conducive to the rise of hate speech.

1.1. Literature review

Some authors place the origins of negative campaigning in the second era of election campaigns (Roemmele and Gibson, 2020), when political communication started to become a profession in response to the rise of television (Joathan and Alves, 2020) as a mass medium (Esser and Pfetsch, 2020). The audio and visual dynamics of this media, together with its ability to broadcast emotional content and personal aspects of politicians (Marcos-García et al., 2021), brought about a change in electoral communication strategy.

Thus, it is no surprise that political parties sought to emphasise the use of these emotions (García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo, 2013) and began to use a communicative approach focused on "attacking and criticising the opponent" (Geer, 2006, p. 23) by disseminating negative content (Russmann 2017). Nowadays, the facilities offered by digital platforms (Bustos-Martínez et al., 2019) allow politicians to freely disseminate messages with rigid and aggressive rhetoric (D'Adamo and García-Beaudoux, 2016). Moreover, far from "highlighting their own virtues", they continuously highlight their opponents' "flaws" (Marcos-García et al., 2021, p. 3).

The nature of communication media is not the only determining factor that encourages politicians to send out negative messages. From a psychological point of view, Hopp and Vargo (2017) claim that negative political information attracts more attention than affirmative or neutral information. This phenomenon, known as the "negativity effect" (García-Beaudoux, et al., 2005, p. 163), states that negative information tends to have a stronger influence "on people's perception and judgment than positive information" (Méndez and Pérez, 1995, p. 19).

1.1.1. Channels of negative election campaigns

The literature that allows negative campaigning to be empirically measured can be summarised in two lines of research (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010). The first examines the effects of negativity on voter turnout (Brooks, 2006; Brooks and Geer, 2007; Lengauer, et al., 2011). Although the second provides an amount of literature that is still limited (Maier and Nai, 2021; Milazzo et al., 2021), studies analysing the behaviour and level of intensity of negative campaigns in different communication channels have recently started to appear.

Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) highlight the need to analyse various media in order to provide real scientific evidence on the use of negative campaigning in elections. In their study they pay special attention to the conduct of such attacks during the 2006 Dutch elections, comparing negative campaigning in three election debates and several newspaper articles. Among the most striking conclusions is the assertion that "the amount of control that politicians exert over communication channels" (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010, p. 455) is an important factor when it comes to whether or not they use negativity in their messages, or that

the less control politicians have over the media, the more the attacks are personal and directed at specific political leaders rather than parties.

Years later, Russmann (2017) attempted to verify the hypothesis of Walter and Vliegenthart (2010), but this time she studied three traditional media controlled by political parties in the 2008 elections in Austria: campaign posters, newspaper advertisements, and press releases. As noted by Russmann (2017, p.110) "the results do not reveal a clear pattern of use of the different types of negative messages". Moreover, in contrast to other pioneering research, a high number of attacks that make judgments about personal characteristics and campaign tactics is apparent in the party-controlled channels. With regard to the 2016 general elections in Spain, in an analysis of Facebook, Marcos-García et al. (2021) observed that the use of criticism by leaders focused on specifically discrediting their rivals rather than parties or the media, by using ideological and emotional derision (Marcos-García et al., 2021).

These analyses point to a clear association between the media coverage of negative campaigns (Pedersen, 2014) and the degree of pressure that politicians are able to exert on existing media (Geer, 2006). In this sense, the current communicative framework eventually toppled the dominant paradigm of mediatised politics in which the prevailing role of the media imposed "certain types of portrayals on the rest of the social actors" (Peris Blanes et al., 2020, p. 56), as well as politicians, and the traditional media started to coexist with social networks in a hybrid space (Chadwick, 2013).

Thus, digital platforms allow politicians to construct direct narratives without the intervention of external social agents (Casero and Yeste 2014). Consequently, faced with a wide range of channels at their disposal in election campaigns, politicians no longer have the "same level of control" over them and, as a result, the magnitude of negative campaigning differs according to the medium used (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010, p. 443).

1.1.2. Factors involved in embracing negative election campaigns

The majority of scholars who are interested in the competition between political parties and leaders (Cerón and d`Adda, 2016) agree on the need to develop different hypotheses on the use of negative campaigning, which are tailored to each country's party system (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008).

According to the positioning hypothesis (Auter and Fine, 2016), in a two-party system the decision to resort to negative campaigning rests on the candidate's position in relation to his or her political rivals in the polls. Candidates who are behind their rivals in the polls (Auter and Fine, 2016) try to take away votes by using negative discourse. Conversely, in a multi-party system, negative campaigning can be truly "effective" (Cerón and d`Adda, 2016, p. 1938) when attacks are directed at politicians with a similar ideology (Curini and Martelli, 2010; Nai, 2018).

This hypothesis seems to contradict the need for political parties in a multi-party system to form coalition governments after elections (Walter, 2012). Consolidating possible government coalitions (Haselmayer, 2019) influences the conduct of negative campaigning between two or more parties who are located at similar points on the political spectrum. Despite having the option of carrying out a negative campaign, if the expression of negativity between ideologically similar parties becomes too aggressive, it can harm their relationship and prevent them from governing together (Walter, 2012; Walter and Der Brug, 2013).

The second theory is presented by Elmelund-Praestekaer (2010, p. 137 et seq.), in which he argues that "proximity to governmental power" affects the degree of negativity in any party system. This hypothesis, previously established by Hansen and Pedersen (2008), asserts that opposition parties become more negative in election campaigns than parties already in the government. As the "incumbent" parties have the option of strengthening their past performance in the mind of the public (Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2010, p. 137 et seq.), rather than build a negative discourse, they use arguments in favour of the official policies they have pursued during their years in government. By contrast, the "challenging" party or parties who oppose the incumbents can only "emphasise future actions and promises" (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008, p. 411).

With all of the foregoing, and bearing in mind that studies on the conduct and nature of negative campaigning are largely unexplored in Spain, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: Is a higher level of negativity discernible by television in the three televised debates during the campaign for the Catalonian Parliamentary elections in February of 2021, or it is higher on the official Twitter accounts of the eight candidates, also during the same election period? Does negative campaigning reach a maximum level in media where politicians do not fully control the message?

RQ2: Does the target, quality, and specific nature of the attacks used by the candidates differ according to the media analysed, also in reference to the period of the Catalonian election campaign?

RQ3: Is the criticism related to the ideology of each candidate? In other words, with regard to both media, do candidates with similar ideologies on the political spectrum attack each other more often, or is the opposite true, where more attacks are observed between leaders with antagonistic ideologies?

RQ4: Do the challenging parties disseminate more criticism than the governing parties?

2. Methodology

2.1. Materials

The questions posed were answered by analysing a sample of the speaking turns made by the nine main candidates for the presidency of the Catalonian government during the three televised debates during the election campaign period, as well as the original publications on their official Twitter accounts. In both cases, the leaders analysed were the following: Salvador Illa; Jéssica Albiach; Alejandro Fernández; Carlos Carrizosa; Ignacio Garriga; Pere Aragonès; Laura Borràs; Àngels Chacón; and Dolors Sabater. "The profiles analysed are" the leaders with "their own parliamentary group" (Gamir-Ríos and Sánchez-Castillo, 2022), in the 12th Legislature of the Catalonian Parliament, as well as the leaders of the parties to which the Centre for Sociological Research (*CIS*) "attributed in its pre-electoral studies a number of votes that was higher" than 0.3% (Gamir-Ríos et al., 2022)

The debates were held on the following dates and locations: 31 January 2021 on *TVE*, moderated by Xabier Fortes; 9 February 2021 on *TV3*, moderated by Vicent Sanchis; and 11 February 2021 on *La Sexta*, moderated by Ana Pastor. The time frame differs in the compilation of the original Twitter posts, and covers a total of 19 days, including not only the election campaign, but also the day of reflection, the polling, and the day after the vote (Gamir-Ríos, 2016). The posts from the last three days have been selected

due to the fact that although "legislation prohibits campaign activities [...] outside the official designated period" (Gamir-Ríos, 2016, p. 112), political coverage is active nonetheless.

The debates were viewed by manually downloading the entire content from the TV channels' official websites. In order to carry out the coding, they were broken down into 435 units of analysis corresponding to all the speaking turns made by the candidates during the debates. This made it possible to analyse each time a candidate spoke, as well as the statements and interruptions that the politicians made among themselves, yet the moments in the debate when the leaders' speeches were too incomprehensible for the analysis to be carried out were discarded. In this way, 6 hours and 58 minutes of television broadcast footage was studied.

To answer the first two research questions, the televised debates were chosen due to their quality as communicative spaces where politicians cannot completely control the information they disseminate to the public, nor do they have strategic control of the information as a consequence (Vaz-Álvarez et al., 2020; Casero-Ripollés, 2009), due to the fact that control is held by the editorial line of each channel. As pointed out by Pérez (2009, p. 999), debates are restructured by using a "format that adheres to previously set rules and behavioural guidelines", in such a way that "they become somewhat controlled".

In the case of Twitter posts, the sample has been collected thanks to *Twitonomy*. The units of analysis shown in Table 1 comprise a total of 589 original tweets corresponding to the official accounts of the nine candidates for president of the Catalonian government. To analyse the posts, a multimodal study was conducted, ranging from the text of a tweet to an image or possible complementary video, yet discarding retweets and responses by the candidates to other users. Twitter has been chosen due to its nature as a means of communication that is completely controlled by the leaders, which allows them to transmit the message without any type of restriction (Gilardi, et al., 2022).

To display the findings of RQ3 and RQ4, the nine candidates were grouped into four specific blocs according to their position on the Spanish left-right political spectrum, the pro-independence left-right spectrum, and two blocs according to their pre-election positions in the Catalonian government.

According to ideological criteria, the non-independence left wing was made up of Salvador Illa and Jéssica Albiach; the non-independence right wing that supports Spanish unity included Alejandro Fernández, Carlos Carrizosa, and Ignacio Garriga; the pro-independence left comprised Pere Aragonés and Dolors Sabater; and the pro-independence right included Laura Borràs and Àngels Chacón.

The Catalonian government for the 12th legislature in 2017 was composed of *JunsXCat* and *ERC*, and the opposition included *Ciudadanos, PSC, En Comú Podem, CUP* and *PP*.

Table 1. Sample based on the candidate and media outlet

Candidate	Political party	Twitter account	Speaking turns in the debates	Posts on Twitter
Salvador Illa	*PSC*	**@salvadorilla**	60	20
Alejandro Fernández	*PP*	**@alejandroTGN**	44	37
Jéssica Albiach	*En comú Podem*	**@jessicaalbiach**	50	158
Carlos Carrizosa	*Ciudadanos*	**@carrizosacarlos**	44	118
Pere Aragonès	*ERC*	**@perearagones**	67	55
Laura Borràs	*JuntsXCat*	**@LauraBorras**	37	49
Dolors Sabater	*CUP*	**@mariadolorsa**	38	56
Ignacio Garriga	*VOX*	**@Igarrigavaz**	52	51
Àngels **Chacón**	*PDeCAT*	**@angelschacon**	43	45
Totals			**435**	**589**

Source: created by the author

2.2 Methodology

The methodology used for this study is based on quantitative-qualitative content analysis. This technique is part of the set of research tools "aimed at explaining and systemising a set of communicative messages in the form of text, sound and images" (Abela, 2002, p. 3), which allows access to features of a phenomenon "in a given context" (Osorio, 2018, p. 224). Furthermore, the fact that the procedure for obtaining the results is both quantitative and qualitative has made it possible to measure the presence, frequency and intensity with which the attributes investigated appear in the two media (Espín-López, 2002).

The percentages were obtained through the development of a coding sheet consisting of 5 variables, 4 of which are related to the study of negative campaigns, which have been addressed in previous research (Marcos-García et al., 2021).

The process of collecting and processing the politicians' hate speech was performed manually by the researcher, after which the final percentages of attacks were placed in an Excel spreadsheet and compared. The same analysis sheet was used for both debates and tweets.

V1: *Medium analysed and the politician who participated in the debate or published the tweet.* This is a register variable, which made it possible, on the one hand, to distinguish whether the research unit pertained to the turn-taking in the televised debates or, if applicable, to the original publications on the Twitter social network. On the other hand, this variable was categorised

according to the nine Catalonian candidates and list leaders by choosing, where appropriate, the leader who spoke in the debate or disseminated the tweet.

V2: *Makes an attack*. This variable reflects the difference between the transmission (or not) of an attack by a leader who spoke in the debate, or the dissemination of a post containing criticism of a rival. We consider an attack on a rival to be any "form of attack, regardless of whether it is unfair, dishonest, irrelevant, or manipulative". In this way, we have codified an attack as any discourse whose main purpose is not the quality of a proposal, but rather the intention to discredit the opponent which, consequently, has a distinct nature, target, and specificity depending on the type of criticism involved.

V3: *Components/quality of the attack*. Taking into account whether the attack was "simple" or "comparative", the author has been able to study the quality aspect of the criticism by using the methodological design previously established by García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo (2013). The "simple" aspect of an attack is defined as criticism that "only points out what is negative about the opponent". By contrast, the "comparative" aspect was classified as such when the subject highlighted the aspects of the proposal, in addition to the attack (García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo, 2013).

V4: *Target of the attack*. Once again, the categorisation used by García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo (2013) was used as a reference. The specific nature of the reproaches was divided into two levels, making a distinction between criticism directed at a political candidate, attacks aimed at a specific political party, and retorts directed at general political blocs. In the case of an attack directed at a specific political candidate, the study attempted to identify the Catalonian political leaders who were the targets of the criticism. Thus, taking into account the politician who spoke in the debate or published the tweet, the rest of the leaders were categorised. When the retort was aimed at a political party or "general political bloc", the values established were indicated according to the eight Catalonian parties, excluding the party represented by the leader transmitting the information. Finally, the category of "general bloc" was further subdivided into the following: "pro-independence bloc"; "non-independence bloc"; "left"; "right"; "pro-independence left"; "non-independence left"; "pro-independence right"; "right wing in defence of Spanish unity"; "Catalonian government"; "Spanish government"; and "parties in general". This was carried out in order to select attacks emanating from specific ideological blocs.

V5: *Typology of the attack*. Adapting the methodologies used by Valera and López (2014) and García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo (2013), five categories of analysis were coded in relation to the type of attack, as well as its combination with the previous variable, "target of the attack". This methodological framework made it possible to distinguish whether the retort was directed at a candidate, a party, or an ideological bloc as a whole. Thus, when the criticism was directed at a candidate, it could be considered one of the following: a) "personal", in the case of attacking the candidate's appearance, personal life, or competence; b) "track record", when this included the previous political record of the candidate under attack; c) "programme-related", when the criticism referred to the proposals of the candidate's programme; d) "ideological", when the attack was related to political ideology; and e) "association", when the candidate was associated with certain people, groups, or political and social sectors considered denigrating in the mind of the public. In the case of attacks directed at a specific party or bloc, the typology of the attack could be related to one of the following: a) the "track record" of the party or bloc; b) the "programme" it presented; c) its "ideology"; (d) "previous management"; and (e) the party's "association with certain individuals, groups, leaders, and political or social sectors", also presented pejoratively in the mind of the public (García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013; Valera and López 2014).

3. Results

3.1. Presence and intensity of the attacks in the election debates and on Twitter

In response to RQ1, as shown in Table 2, with regard to the 589 original Twitter posts, only 21% (n=122) were aimed at attacking a political opponent. A more intense level of negativity can be seen in the speeches given during the three televised debates, as the data reveal that in 47% (n=206) of the speaking turns, all nine candidates attacked the other leaders or parties at least once. Moreover, it bears mentioning that during the course of the debates, the candidates made frequent use of negative campaigning, offering two or more disparaging remarks in the same speech (69%).

Table 2. Total percentage of attacks by the leaders and their conduct in both media

	Debates (%)	Twitter (%)
Made an attack	47%	21%
Did not make an attack	53%	79%
Attack was directed at a candidate	39.53%	18.03%
Attack was directed at a bloc	60.47%	82.79%
Comparative aspect	35.22%	66.39%
Simple aspect	**68.11%**	**33.61%**

Source: created by the author

The analysis of negative campaign behaviour (RQ2) points to a clear difference between the negativity of the leaders' speeches in the debates and on Twitter. On the social network, candidates criticised their opponents much more often with the comparative aspect (66.39%) rather than simple (33.61%). By contrast, the study of the debates showed that the simple aspect reached a percentage of 68.11%, with the comparative quality taking second position at 35.22%.

As for specificity of the criticism, fairly similar percentages were found in the analysis of both media. On both television and Twitter, all nine candidates used a negative tactic by directly alluding to specific parties and blocs. However, the quantitative methodology has allowed us to identify significant differences in the number of critical remarks directed at candidates during the debates and in the tweets. When politicians disseminated posts with attacks online, only 18.03% of those critical comments were intended to make judgments about others, while in the debates, offensive remarks that the candidates directed at each other increased to nearly 40%.

Focusing on the typology of the attack, three different negative dynamics can be observed, depending on the target of the criticism and the channel. In both media, when candidates focused their negative comments on parties or blocs, they prioritised attacks aimed at discrediting their previous management and ideological features. In general, the candidates take a position that tends

to discredit the previous decisions and policies of the parties as a whole, as well as ideological values, making use of anecdotal criticism focused on reproaching electoral programmes or the performance history of the party or bloc.

A second dynamic shows that the retorts between candidates in the posts were more personal (27.27%), as they exploited a contemptuous approach toward the private lives of the other leaders. Likewise, ideological attacks and vilification related to association with other social or political groups were also present in the tweets, with percentages close to 30% in each category. In the debates, however, according to the third dynamic, offensive personal retorts were less frequent (18.11%), with ideological confrontations (29.92%) and criticism of the candidate's previous record (39.37%) occupying most of the time in the total number of negative speech turns on television.

Table 3. Total percentages related to the convergence of typology and direction of the attacks in both media

Convergence of typology and target of the attack	Debates (%)	Twitter (%)
Personal attack on the candidate	18.11%	27.27%
Ideological attack on the candidate	29.92%	27.27%
Attack on the candidate's track record	39.37%	13.64%
Attack on the candidate's associations	5.51%	27.27%
Attack on the candidate's programme	7.09%	4.55%
Ideological attack	21.27%	40.59%
Attack on the management of the party or bloc	61.49%	33.66%
Attack on the associations of the party or bloc	3.45%	17.82%
Attack on the track record of the party or bloc	9.77%	1.98%
Attack on the programme of the party or bloc	4.02%	2.97%

Source: created by the author

Making negative judgments about the programmes of political leaders (4.55% on Twitter posts), or their associations with groups that are denigrating in the mind of the public (5.51% in debates), were also present on both channels.

3.2 Political factors in voicing criticism

While it is true that there are ideological patterns of conduct in terms of the targets of the attacks (RQ3), the findings show that criticism between candidates on Twitter and in the debates were not solely and exclusively due to the ideologies presented by the leaders themselves. As seen in Table 4, with the exception of Jéssica Albiach, all the leaders attacked the PSC candidate on at least one occasion. In fact, the highest total percentage of attacks aimed at specific candidates was received by Salvador Illa, both on Twitter (11.48%) and in the debates as well (13.26%).

The data collected on Salvador Illa verify his status as the political leader who received the highest number of derogatory comments, which seems to be closely related to the large amount of criticism directed at his party, the PSOE. Even Albiach, who shares the same ideology as Illa, published three negative tweets against the latter's governmental partners in the national territory, and in 8.33% of the total number of attacks in the debate, she even issued ideological reproaches against the same party. At the same time, it is especially noteworthy that it was Illa himself who made the fewest attacks, following a clear ideological pattern in the target of the negative messages, as they were directed at the right-wing candidates in defence of Spanish unity, Alejandro Fernández and Ignacio Garriga, as well as pro-independence candidates, such as Laura Borrás, who were the main targets of the Socialist leader's pejorative comments in more than 60% of the attacks he delivered in the debates.

Table 4. Total percentages of the quantity and targets of the attacks made by non-independence candidates in both media

The leader who attacked / Target of the attack		Salvador Illa (%)	Alejandro Fernández (%)	Jéssica Albiach (%)	Carlos Carrizosa (%)	Ignacio Garriga (%)
Salvador Illa	Twitter	/	63.64%	0%	7.89%	0%
	Debates	/	22.86%	0%	10.53%	6.35%
Alejandro Fernández	Twitter	0%	/	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	11.11%	/	0%	0%	3.17%
Jéssica Albiach	Twitter	0%	0%	/	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	2.86	/	8.77%	0%
Carlos Carrizosa	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	/	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	8.33%	/	1.53%
Ignacio Garriga	Twitter	0%	0%	2.86%	0%	/
	Debates	16.67%	14.29%	0%	8.77%	/
Pere Aragonès	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	5.56%	0%	8.33%	7.02%	6.35%
Laura Borràs	Twitter	0%	0%	8.57%	2.63%	0%
	Debates	22.22%	0%	12.50%	10.53%	0%

Àngels Chacón	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	11.43%	0%		1.59%
Dolors Sabater	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	11.43%	12.50%		3.17%
PSOE	Twitter	/	27.27%	8.57%		0%
	Debates	/	11.43%	8.33%		0%
PP	Twitter	0%	/	2.86%		0%
	Debates	5.56%	/	4.17%		1.53%
Unidas Podemos	Twitter	0%	0%	/		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	/		0%
Ciudadanos	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	8.33%		1.59%
Vox	Twitter	0%	0%	17.14%		/
	Debates	0%	0%	4.17%		/
ERC	Twitter	0%	0%	8.57%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	16.67%		0%
JuntsXCat	Twitter	0%	0%	8.57%		0%
	Debates	5.56%	0%	12.50%		0%
PeDCat	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
CUP	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
Pro-independence bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	16.67%	2.86%	0%		22.22%
Non-independence bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
Left-wing bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		4.76%
	Debates	0%	2.86%	0%		
Right-wing bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	2.86%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
Right-wing bloc in defence of Spanish unity	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
Right-wing pro-independence	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%

Left-wing non-independence	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
Left-wing pro-independence	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%		0%
Catalonian government	Twitter	100%	9.09%	37.14%		33.33%
	Debates	11.11%	14.29%	12.50%		0%
Spanish government	Twitter	0%	0%	0%		0%
	Debates	0%	5.71%	0%		1.59%
Other parties	Twitter	0%	0%	2.86%		22.22%
	Debates	5.56%	0%	4.17%		46.03%

Source: created by the author

The communicative strategy of reproach used by Albiach was dominated by criticism strictly against the main leaders and groups of the pro-independence bloc that comprised the previous government. While it is true that 8.33% of Albiach's attacks were focused on Carlos Carrizosa in the debates, and that 17.14% of her negative posts were directed at the extreme right-wing party *Vox*, most of her criticism was aimed at Laura Borrás (12.50% in the debates and 8.57% on Twitter), at her party, *JuntsXCat* (12.50% in the debates and 8.57% on Twitter), and at ERC (16.67% in the debates and 8.57% on Twitter). Therefore, the targets of Albiach's criticism is not influenced by ideology. Instead, she focuses her efforts on attacking the measures taken by the Catalonian government (12.50% in the debates).

Alejandro Fernández and Carlos Carrizosa employed a similar tactic of negative appeals in both media. In the debates, both issued negative statements against Albiach (2.86% of the attacks by Alejandro Fernández's and 8.77% of those made by Carrizosa), and against Salvador Illa (22.86% for Alejandro Fernández and 10.53% for Carlos Carrizosa). However, there was fierce criticism of Ignacio Garriga, who received numerous denigrating comments from both candidates.

To make a distinction between the two candidates, we can see how Carlos Carrizosa, who was leader of the opposition in the legislature prior to the elections under study, and despite the fact that during the debates he attacked most of the leaders indiscriminately, he exploited the social network and the minutes provided to him by the television channels to repeatedly make negative comments against the leaders of the Catalonian government and its parties. By contrast, Alejandro Fernández hardly used Twitter to generate controversy beyond his criticisms of Salvador Illa, yet he crafted his ideological reproaches in his television minutes, as shown by his attacks on the leaders of the left-wing, both nationalist and pro-independence.

Image 1. Tweets by Carlos Carrizosa and Alejandro Fernández criticising Salvador Illa

Source: Twitter.com

Ignacio Garriga was the candidate who made the highest percentage of attacks according to the number of speaking turns in the debates (65%), while of his 51 publications on the social network, only 9 were directly critical. Despite personifying the criticism against leaders of both the right and the left-wings, as well as those who support non-independence and those who favour pro-independence, the analysis has shown that he is the candidate who grouped his derogatory statements into specific ideological blocs, such as his 14 retorts to the pro-independence bloc, and to all of the parties as a whole (46.03% of the debates).

With regard to Pere Aragonès, he became the leader who, just behind Illa, made the lowest number of negative comments in the debates, issuing only 25 attacks in his 67 speaking turns. On Twitter, he only attacked his rivals in 7 out of 55 posts. The strategy used by Aragonès follows the same dynamic in both media, based on discrediting Salvador Illa, the PSOE, and the central government. Moreover, although it was confirmed that Aragonès built a discourse to discredit leaders such as Carlos Carrizosa and Àngels Chacón, the percentages were trivial, as a clear pattern of negativity toward the right-wing bloc was not established. In spite of this, Aragonés was the pro-independence candidate with the highest number of critical statements against Ignacio Garriga in the debates (16%).

For her part, Laura Borràs differed in the number of adverse comments she made, according to the media analysed, yet the data provide evidence to confirm that the target of her criticism indeed showed an ideological pattern. Thus, the leader of JuntsXCat is the one who spread fewer attacks on Twitter (4%), and when she published posts with pejorative statements, she did so against Salvador Illa and the central government. In the debates, despite obtaining a higher percentage of reproaches for each speaking turn (51%), the main target of her negative rebukes continued to be Illa (26.09%), Jéssica Albiach (8.70%), *Unidas Podemos* (8%), *ERC* (4.35%), and the central government (47.83%).

Image 2. Tweets by Pere Aragonès and Laura Borràs with attacks directed at Salvador Illa and the Central Government

Source: Twitter.com

Table 5. Total percentages of the quantity and targets of the attacks made by pro-independence candidates in the debates and on Twitter

The leader who attacked / Target of the attack		Pere Aragonès	Laura Borràs	Àngels Chacón	Dolors Sabater
Salvador Illa	Twitter	28.57%	50%	7.69%	0%
	Debates	32%	26.09%	8.33%	18.75%
Alejandro Fernández	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	4%	0%	0%	0%
Jéssica Albiach	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	8.70%	0%	3.13%
Carlos Carrizosa	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	4%	0%	0%	3.13%
Pere Aragonès	Twitter	/	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	/	0%	0%	3.13%
Laura Borràs	Twitter	0%	/	23.08%	0%
	Debates	0%	/	12.50%	0%

Dolors Sabater	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	/
	Debates	0%	0%	4.17%	/
Ignacio Garriga	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	16%	4.35%	0%	15.63%
Àngels Chacón	Twitter	0%	0%	/	0%
	Debates	4%	4.35%	/	0%
PSOE	Twitter	57.14%	0%	0%	16.67%
	Debates	8%	0%	4.17%	6.25%
PP	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%	0%
Unidas Podemos	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	8%	4.35%	0%	0%
Ciudadanos	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	4%	0%	0%	0%
Vox	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%	0%
ERC	Twitter	/	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	/	4.35%	8.33%	3.13%
JuntsXCat	Twitter	0%	/	30.77%	0%
	Debates	4%	/	8.33%	0%
PeDCat	Twitter	0%	0%	/	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	/	3.13%
CUP	Twitter	0%	0%	23.08%	/
	Debates	0%	0%	12.50%	/
Pro-independence bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	4.17%	0%
Non-independence bloc	Twitter	14.29%	50%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%	0%
Left-wing bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	4.17%	0%
Right-wing bloc	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	0%	0%
Right-wing in defence of Spanish unity	Twitter	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Debates	0%	0%	4.17%	0%

Right-wing pro-independence	Twitter Debates	0% 0%	0% 0%	0% 0%	0% 0%
Left-wing non-independence	Twitter Debates	0% 0%	0% 0%	0% 4.17%	0% 0%
Left-wing pro-independence	Twitter Debates	0% 0%	0% 0%	7.69% 7.69%	0% 0%
Catalonian government	Twitter Debates	0% 0%	0% 0%	7.69% 8.33%	50% 15.63%
Spanish government	Twitter Debates	0% 16%	0% 47.83%	0% 8.33%	16.67% 9.38%
Other parties	Twitter Debates	0% 0%	0% 0%	0% 8.33%	16.67% 18.75%

Source: created by the author

In the case of Àngels Chacón, the percentages of attacks in both media never exceeded 40%. When the *PDeCAT* leader strengthened her attacks on specific candidates, a clear aversion toward three politicians was reflected: Salvador Illa, Laura Borràs, and Dolors Sabater. On television, the percentage of criticism directed at Borrás reached 12.50% of her speaking turns; Illa received 8.33%; and Sabater 4.17%. Even on Twitter, the JuntsXCat leader accounted for more than 20% of the posts published by Chacón that had at least one negative comment.

Moreover, the criteria followed by Àngels Chacón when it comes to targeting her criticism at specific parties or blocs has also been confirmed. This leader focused most of her negative comments on the three pro-independence parties and the Catalonian government. Therefore, on Twitter, Chacón directed 30.77% of her negative posts at *Junts*, and 23.08% at ERC. In the debates, the CUP was the most reviled party, obtaining a percentage of 12.50% of the total number of attacks issued by Àngels. The PDeCAT leader also circulated criticism against the central government and the parties of the non-independence left, yet it is clear that Àngels Chacón distinguishes herself by focusing her criticism specifically at the pro-independence bloc.

Finally, Dolors Sabater, whose party is ideologically located within the pro-independence left and was part of the opposition, made greater use of negativity in the debates, where 54% of her speaking turns contained criticism, compared to Twitter, in which 11% of the posts contained attacks. Thus, as with most of the candidates, the politician at whom she directed most of her attacks was Salvador Illa (18.75% in the debates). However, in her speaking turns during the televised minutes, together with Pere Aragonès, Dolors Sabater was the pro-independence candidate who voiced the most negative comments against the leader of the extreme right (15.63%). Moreover, the fact that on some occasions she made unfavourable statements about Carlos Carrizosa and Jéssica Albiach confirms that her criticism was not influenced by ideology.

Image 3. Compilation of tweets by Àngels Chacón and Dolors Sabater criticising Laura Borràs, JuntsXCat and ERC

Source: Twitter.com

On the contrary, if we focus on critical comments against specific blocs, the tendency of Sabater was to make negative statements against the Catalonian and central government. Thus, in 50% of her tweets that contained some kind of criticism, and in 15.63% of her speaking turns in the debates with censure, the negative comments of the *CUP* leader were directed toward the parties that comprise the Catalonian government. Similarly, 9.38% of her negative comments were used to attack the central government in the debates, and 16.67% on Twitter. Even when Sabater used a negative narrative against the parties as a whole, the percentage of attacks in both channels through speaking turns and disparaging tweets exceeded 15%.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of this research is to confirm the nature of the attacks emanating from Catalonian political candidates in televised debates and on Twitter. Another aim is to analyse the possible determining factors that led these same leaders to use a negative discourse during the campaign period of the elections held in February of 2021.

In line the postulate offered by Walter and Vliegenthart (2010), the findings obtained allow us to establish a general hypothesis that the intensity and manner of the attacks in the various media are expressed in many ways (Milazzo et al., 2021), depending on the control exercised by the politician in issuing his or her content. In response to RQ1 regarding the level of negativity in the two media analysed, it has been confirmed that criticism is used much more in televised debates than on Twitter.

Thus, although the results show that negative campaigning was present on the social network, none of the political leaders exceeded 35% with regard to tweets that might contain some kind of derogatory comment toward their rivals, a percentage that is

not far from that found in previous Spanish studies on negativity in social networks (Marcos-García et al., 2021; Donstrup, 2019; Abejón-Mendoza and Mayoral-Sánchez, 2017). By contrast, in the debates the candidates discredited their political opponents with greater intensity.

It is possible that the percentage differences regarding the level of negativity that the politicians constructed in the two media is not exclusively due to the dominance that these leaders have over their message, but might also be influenced by the inherent nature of the channel. One possible explanation for these findings is that the physical space of the debates, which is a television studio where politicians meet each other face to face and in-person, makes the opponents more prone to expressing derogatory comments toward each other than on Twitter. Despite the obvious audience fragmentation, which has been fostered by the proliferation of channels (Casero-Ripollés, 2009), election debates are still very large media events, and the audience does not have the same ideology. Consequently, politicians who participate and present their arguments are able to gain an advantage on certain occasions (Vaz-Álvarez et al., 2020), an example of which is undecided voters. By contrast, on the Twitter social network, where the number of text characters is limited, and where homophilic segregation (Aruguete, 2019) "keeps citizens in ideologically closed worlds" (Waisbord, 2020, p. 265), candidates emphasise their own positive aspects rather than discredit their opponents.

In relation to RQ2, different parameters are evident, depending on the channel examined.

Thus, as occurred with Facebook in research carried out by Marcos-García et al. (2021), Twitter is now consolidated as a digital platform in which criticism has acquired a comparative aspect, and leaders have been using a "destructive-constructive" strategy (Marcos-García et al., 2021) when attacking their opponents. By contrast, in televised debates politicians emphasise the weaknesses of their opponents rather than their own virtues.

In the case of the target of criticism, contrary to expectations, leaders posted a large number of attacks on Twitter against specific political parties, and blocs in particular, generally avoiding direct reprimands of their opponents. Candidates such as Dolors Sabater, Ignacio Garriga and Salvador Illa did not post any derogatory statements against rival political figures. However, in the debates one could see that there was a higher percentage of negative comments aimed at the candidates present on the set.

Regarding the typology of Twitter attacks, the findings are not supported by previous research by Russmann (2017). However, some of the results coincide with studies of negativity in the Spanish democratic system (Marcos-García et al., 2021; Valera and López, 2014). In the microblogging network, the content of the attacks aimed at parties and governmental bodies were mainly challenges to ideology and previous management, while the posts aimed at criticising specific rivals focused on discrediting the personal traits of the candidates, as well as their association with groups considered offensive in the mind of the public. In the debates, the largest number of critical comments aimed at political organisations sought to emphasise, as in the case of the social network, their previous mismanagement and ideology, while the allegations that attempted to negatively assess rivals tried to criticise the candidates' previous track record and the ideology they upheld.

The results regarding RQ3 and RQ4 cannot be understood without knowing the political context of the Catalonian territory, which differs greatly from that of the national context (López-Pereira, et al., 2019). It is worth noting that the Catalonian electoral system is unique, due to the need for leaders of the political parties known as ERC, JuntsXCat, CUP and PDeCAT to achieve independence by perpetuating the "identity of the community and the legal status of the territory" (Carratalá and Palau-Sampio, 2019: 79). On the opposite side are the PP, PSOE (PSC at the regional level), and Ciudadanos who, following the reading in the Catalonian

Parliament of the declaration of independence agreed upon by the pro-independence MPs in 2017, applied or supported the suspension of autonomy in accordance with their interpretation of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution (Marzo, 2019). After the regional elections of 2021, Vox joined these three parties. Finally, taking a more neutral stance is Unidas Podemos (*En Comú Podem* in the autonomous region). Although it "has expressed a positive attitude with regard to the right to self-determination, it has always done so timidly" (March, 2019, p. 503).

Based on the foregoing, different trends can be observed in the factors that have motivated politicians to issue messages that denigrate their rivals. Firstly, the fact that the leaders of all the political parties criticised Salvador Illa and the PSOE supports the theory put forward by Nai (2020), who suggests that candidates "attack upward"; in other words, regardless of ideology, leaders focus their attacks on the leader whom the polls predict will be the clear winner. In this sense, one should not exaggerate (Walter and der Brug 2013) nor argue that polls play a fundamental role only in two-party systems, since they also influence the decisions of parties to adopt negative campaigning strategies in multi-party systems as well.

Secondly, we can confirm that partisan competition affects negativity bias (Dolezal et al., 2016). The attacks that took place seem to have been driven generally by ideology, and leaders tried to focus their attacks on candidates who were outside the leanings of their own party. By using contextual logic, the decision to give a negative assessment to leaders whose parties formed a coalition with the central government lies in the need for Pere Aragonés, Laura Borrás, Àngels Chacón and Dolors Sabater to highlight their discourse of independence among the population. Alejandro Fernández and Carlos Carrizosa expanded the message they supported in national parliamentary acts, directing their negativity toward the left-wing. However, their repeated attacks on Ignacio Garriga support the hypothesis of Curini and Martelli (2010) and Walter (2014), and allow us to see that offensive criticism between parties with similar ideologies increases "disagreement on key issues, which opens the window of opportunity for attacks based on ideology" (Nai, 2020).

Finally, in response to RQ4, with regard to the previous hypothesis set forth by Elmelund-Praestekaer (2010), it has been confirmed that leaders whose parties were in opposition before the elections generated more negativity in the two media.

Finally, this research has a number of limitations that should be addressed in future studies on negative campaigning. Although the sample is large enough to confirm the validity of the research questions put forth, it will be necessary to include other media and communication formats in the universe under study. Likewise, in order to extrapolate the results to the national and international spheres, studies should be carried out that analyse the same determining factors in other regional and European elections.

5. Acknowledgements

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