

Mobile instant messaging services and political participation: use and perception of usefulness by citizens in Spain

Servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea y participación política: uso y percepción de utilidad por parte de la ciudadanía en España



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Abstract:

Mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram have enabled new possibilities for the reconfiguration of democracy. Despite their popularisation, there is still limited research analysing the role of citizenship on these digital platforms in relation to politics. Therefore, our objective is to analyse citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services for political activity and their perception of these platforms'

Resumen:

Los servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea como WhatsApp o Telegram han abierto nuevas posibilidades para la reconfiguración de la democracia. Pese a su popularización, todavía son escasas las investigaciones que analizan el rol de la ciudadanía en estas plataformas digitales en términos políticos. Por ello, nuestro objetivo es analizar el uso ciudadano de estas plataformas para la actividad política y la

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usefulness for citizen participation. Additionally, we aim to determine the impact of sociopolitical factors on these uses. To achieve this, we conducted a survey through an online panel on the Qualtrics platform, launched in May 2023 and completed by 1,106 citizens residing in Spain. The results show that 91.32% of the surveyed users regularly use these digital platforms for political purposes, although their use significantly declines during election campaign periods. Generally, citizens are highly satisfied with using these platforms for involvement in public decision-making processes. Finally, it demonstrates how gender, ideology, and interest in politics are the most influential factors in the three variables analysed.

Keywords:

Political communication; citizens; mobile instant messaging services; participation; sociopolitical factors.

percepción de su utilidad para la participación ciudadana. Además, se pretende determinar la incidencia que tienen en estos los factores sociopolíticos. Para ello se ha realizado una encuesta mediante un panel online de la plataforma Qualtrics que se lanzó en mayo de 2023 y fue contestado por un total de 1106 ciudadanos residentes en España. Los resultados muestran que el 91.32% de los usuarios encuestados utilizan de forma ordinaria los servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea en relación con la política, si bien su uso decae significativamente durante el periodo de campaña electoral. Por lo general, los ciudadanos los consideran útiles para el involucramiento en los procesos de toma de decisiones públicas. Por último, se demuestra como el género, la ideología y el interés por la política son los factores más influyentes en las tres variables analizadas.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación política; ciudadanía; servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea; participación; factores sociopolíticos.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have shifted the communication paradigm within the contemporary political sphere, reshaping the participation of diverse social actors. The traditional boundaries between political and journalistic elites have become increasingly blurred, empowering the public to take an active role. Citizens do not only consume information but also autonomously create and distribute their own content (Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 2009; Ceccarini, 2015). In this context, despite the enduring prominence of traditional media (Casero-Ripollés, 2021), the consolidation of social media as a communication tool has facilitated citizen empowerment (Castells, 2009).

Digital platforms provide new avenues for media consumption and political participation, enabling citizens to express their opinions more openly and freely (Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2021). Citizens use these platforms not only to access online versions of offline content but also to create original content, comment on public issues or mobilise for social causes, thereby fostering new forms of political participation. In this context, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2021) establish a causal link between the consumption of news via social media and increased political participation.

Until recently, platforms like X/Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have been the predominant online spaces for citizen participation in public affairs. However, in recent years, mobile instant messaging services have surged in popularity and have emerged as critical channels for political communication between parties and citizens. This shift has fundamentally transformed communication processes among various social actors (Zamora-Medina and Losada-Díaz, 2021; Pont-Sorribes, Besalú and Codina, 2020). The user base of these services has expanded exponentially as they offer direct engagement with social issues that directly impact citizens' daily lives (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The privacy of these platforms makes them particularly appealing for quickly disseminating information to a large audience. Moreover, they facilitate discussions in closed environments where messages are delivered directly to users' devices through private conversations without third-

party access (Vermeer et al. 2021). This aspect encourages users to create smaller, more private social groups, diverging from the more inclusive and open nature of social media platforms like Facebook or X/Twitter (Valeriani and Vaccari 2018).

Among these applications, as of February 2023, WhatsApp leads with 2,244 billion users worldwide, while Telegram has already reached 800 million users (We Are Social, 2023). Despite their growing popularity and large user bases, research on mobile instant messaging services in the field of political communication is still in its infancy (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). This, coupled with the historical predominance of studies focusing on media and political actors in the digital sphere, creates an especially compelling context for exploring the role of citizens within these platforms. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to analyse citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services for political activity and the perception of their usefulness for citizen participation. Furthermore, this research is particularly original as it also examines the impact of sociopolitical factors on these issues.

2. The platformisation of political communication

In recent years, mobile devices have become indispensable tools in citizens' daily lives. Over 90% of users in Spain consider them their primary means of accessing their social networks (AIMC, 2020), making them essential elements across various sectors. (Plantin and Punathambekar, 2019). Despite their primarily social origins, connectivity, immediacy, portability, personalisation and ubiquity of these technologies, they contribute to reshaping the communicative and social landscape on a broad scale (Aguado and Martínez, 2008). Consequently, these digital media platforms are not only central to social interactions but also influence consumption habits and even citizens' political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021).

The concept of "Life Mobile Style", which denotes the need to be constantly connected to a mobile device, has led to a significant increase in the consumption of political information through these technologies (Guzmán and Sánchez-Medero, 2016). The immediacy and global reach inherent in mobile communication have facilitated the widespread dissemination of information, enabling it to reach recipients instantly. Recent studies have shown that political content ranks among the most consumed by mobile users (Varona-Aramburu, Sánchez-Martín and Arrocha, 2017). This trend is driven by individuals interested in such information and spending more time accessing the internet to stay informed (Stephens et al., 2014), a habit they transfer to mobile platforms. Overall, these technologies expand their advantages to other platforms and create a flexible environment for discussing politics and public affairs, connecting users virtually anytime and anywhere (Vanden Abeele, De Wolf and Ling, 2018; Campbell and Kwak, 2011).

2.1. Citizen use of mobile instant messaging services

Alongside social media like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, the digital environment provides citizens with new avenues for the reconfiguration of democracy. Mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram are central to this transformation, and their use has become extraordinarily popular in recent years. These platforms offer limitless content creation and dissemination opportunities while remaining highly accessible to citizens. Consequently, they have evolved into preferred spaces for generating new forms of interaction and fostering social connectivity, which is crucial to the emergence of a new participatory culture (Ling, 2017; Bayer et al., 2016).

Mobile instant messaging services enable individuals to engage in political activities. They are becoming primary sources of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Through them, as previous studies confirm (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero Ripollés, 2022), they facilitate the “news finds me” effect (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl, 2019), whereby users receive current information on their mobile devices and share it with their contacts. This process enhances their knowledge of and encourages their involvement in public issues of interest (Lee et al., 2014), fostering a sense of community engagement (Osah and Pade-Khene, 2020). This effect is particularly effective locally (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero Ripollés, 2022), where larger populations face more significant challenges staying informed and engaging with essential local topics (Frandsen, 2002).

Another potential of mobile instant messaging services for citizens in political terms is that, due to their controlled environment, they enable political participation to differ from other digital platforms where interaction is public and open. As they are based on private communication, these services cultivate a much more conversational and multimodal character that differs from other networks (Matassi, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2019), thereby facilitating the exchange of personal comments on political matters of interest (Yamamoto, Kushiny Dalisay 2018). Just as political parties use these channels to shield themselves from potential criticism by opponents (Tirado-García, 2022), citizens similarly turn to these spaces to feel safer when expressing opinions openly and to avoid discomfort and possible negative reactions found on other social media such as Facebook or Twitter (Karapanos, Teixeira and Gouveia, 2016).

Using mobile instant messaging services also increases citizens’ awareness of their surroundings, social issues that affect them and topics of personal interest. As a result, political debates on these services promote advocacy for shared causes and social mobilisation, bridging offline and online participation (Rodríguez-Estrada, Muñoz and Echeverría, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge and Diehl, 2018; Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). In this regard, these platforms possess a viral potential and broad reach, enabling unprecedented connections to pursue democratic objectives (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). In the Spanish context, an example of the potential of mobile instant messaging services was observed during the *Tsunami Democràtic* movement in 2019 in Catalonia- in response to the verdict from the trial regarding the independence process. This collective created a Telegram channel that enabled its followers to organise mobilisations, disseminate their objectives and coordinate protests (López-Tàrraga, 2020).

3. Methodology

The objective of this study is to analyse citizens’ use of mobile instant messaging services for political activity and their perception of their usefulness for citizen participation. A quantitative content analysis technique was employed via an online survey (CEISH/19/2022) to accomplish this. The survey was launched in May 2023 via the Qualtrics platform, a specialised tool for conducting online surveys, and the response collection period lasted one week, strategically chosen as it preceded three critical elections: municipal and regional elections (both on 28 May 2023) and the national election (July 23, 2023). A total of 1106 citizens residing in Spain participated in the survey (50/50 gender balance and including individuals aged 18 and above).

The following research questions were proposed:

RQ1. What is citizens' political use of mobile instant messaging services during regular political periods and the electoral campaign?

RQ2. How do citizens perceive the usefulness of mobile instant messaging services for political participation?

RQ3. What impact do sociopolitical factors have on the level of political engagement using mobile instant messaging services and their perception of their usefulness for political participation?

Three variables have been used to respond to the posed research questions:

- a) Use of mobile instant messaging services during the regular political period. Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they use platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram for political purposes outside the election campaign period. This variable was measured through a Likert scale, where 1 = never and 5 = every day.
- b) Use of mobile instant messaging services during the electoral campaign. Respondents were asked to specify how often they use platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram for political purposes during the electoral campaigns. This variable was measured using a Likert scale, where 1 = never and 5 = every day.
- c) Perception of the usefulness of mobile instant messaging services for citizen participation. Users were asked to rate the effectiveness of platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram for citizen participation. This variable was measured using a Likert scale, where 1 = not useful at all and 5 = extremely useful.

Six sociopolitical variables were selected as independent variables:

- a) Gender. Divided into two categories: men and women.
- b) Age: Divided into five categories: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-64, 65+.
- c) Education level: Divided into three categories: primary school or less, secondary education, and university education.
- d) Ideology: Divided into 6 categories: radical left, moderate left, centre, moderate right, extreme right, apolitical.
- e) Intention to vote in the next elections: Divided into two categories: yes or no.
- f) Interest in national political affairs: Divided into five categories: none at all, very little, somewhat, quite a lot/bit, a lot.

ANOVA tests were conducted to examine the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. This method allows us to determine whether there were statistically significant differences among groups for each dependent variable analysed (Babbie, 2004). Data processing was performed using the statistical package SPSS v.29.

4. Results

4.1. Citizen use of mobile instant messaging services and Perceived perception of usefulness for political participation

The data indicate that Spanish citizens use mobile instant messaging services for political purposes with a medium-high frequency, as evidenced by mean values above 3 on a scale from zero to five during regular periods and electoral campaigns.

This suggests that citizens have largely incorporated these platforms into their daily lives as an additional channel for political activity, whether for informational purposes, participation in public debate, mobilisation, etc.

Our results indicate that citizen use of these platforms declines significantly during the electoral campaign period compared to regular political periods. Specifically, citizens use these platforms more frequently during regular political periods (M=3.93; DS=1.401) (Table 1) than in the fifteen days leading up to the elections (M=3.29; DS=1.501) (Table 1). This decline occurs despite intensified communication strategies by political parties, which disseminate substantial amounts of information and campaign-related messages through these applications during the electoral period. Regarding citizens' perception of the usefulness of mobile instant messaging services for political participation, the data also show a high average, suggesting that users generally find these platforms useful for engaging in political activities and connecting with their political community (M=3.51, DS=1.024) (Table 1).

Table 1. Level of citizen use of mobile instant messaging services and perceived usefulness for citizen participation

	M	DS
Use in the regular period	3.93	1.401
Use in electoral campaigns	3.29	1.501
Perception of usefulness for political participation	3.51	1.024

Source: created by the authors

4.2. Impact of sociopolitical factors

The ANOVA test results show that gender is a significant, influential factor in the three variables analysed. Specifically, we found statistically significant differences between men and women in their use of mobile instant messaging services during both regular political periods ($p < .001$; M= 3,93; DS= 1.401) and campaign periods ($p = .011$; M= 3,29; DS= 1.510) as well as in the perceived usefulness for political participation ($p = .002$; M= 3,51; DS= 1.024). During regular political periods, men (M=3.97; DS=1.401) reported higher usage values than women (M=3.89; DS= 1.401) when using mobile instant messaging services for political purposes (Table 2). This trend continues during the electoral campaign, albeit less prominently, with men (M=3.34; DS=1.465) using these platforms more often than women (M=3.24; DS=1.553) (Table 2). These findings are consistent with the results regarding the perception of the usefulness of these channels for political participation, which becomes particularly salient during electoral campaigns. Men consider these channels more useful for political participation (M=3.58; DS=0.979) compared to women (M=3.45; DS=1.06) (Table 2).

Table 2. Citizen use of mobile instant messaging services and the perceived usefulness for citizen participation by gender

	MEN		WOMEN		ANOVA
	M	DS	M	DS	P
Use in the regular period	3.97	1.401	3.89	1.385	<.001*
Use in electoral campaigns	3.34	1.465	3.24	1.553	.011***
Perception of usefulness for political participation	3.58	.979	3.45	1.06	.002**

*p<.001; **p<0.1; ***p<.05

Source: created by the authors

The ANOVA test reveals a statistically significant relationship between age and the use of mobile instant messaging services in political terms, both during regular periods ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,93$; $DS = 1.401$) and electoral campaigns ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,29$; $DS = 1.510$). In this regard, the results indicate that, as age increases, the use of these digital platforms for political participation decreases. Individuals over 65 constitute the age group that use these services the least both during electoral campaigns ($M = 2.94$; $DS = 1.489$) and regular periods ($M = 3.45$; $DS = 1.538$) (Table 3). Conversely, the age group most likely to use these channels for political purposes includes individuals aged 18-24 during regular periods ($M = 4.17$; $DS = 1.253$) and those aged 25-34 during electoral campaigns ($M = 3.44$; $DS = 1.451$) (Table 3).

Regarding the perceived usefulness of using mobile instant messaging services for citizens' political participation, the data reveals that it is not an influential factor as there is no statistically significant relationship between both variables ($p = .203$; $M = 3,51$; $DS = 1.024$). Citizens over 65 have the highest value in this regard ($M = 3.56$; $DS = 0.858$). It should be noted that this is the age group that uses these mobile applications the least. Conversely, the 45-64 age group perceives these tools as the least useful for citizen participation ($M = 3.47$; $DS = 1.003$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Citizen use and perception of the usefulness of Mobile Instant Messaging services for Citizen Participation by age

	18-24		25-34		35-44		45-64		+65		ANOVA
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	p
Use in the regular period	4.17	1.253	4.13	1.298	3.85	1.422	3.62	1.541	3.45	1.538	<.001*
Use in electoral campaigns	3.43	1.481	3.44	1.451	3.25	1.53	3.08	1.550	2.94	1.489	<.001*
Perception of usefulness for political participation	3.55	1.107	3.50	1.029	3.52	.990	3.47	1.033	3.56	.858	.203

*p<.001

Source: created by the authors

The analysis of the data by education level according to the ANOVA test indicates that education level is capable of influencing the citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services for political purposes during regular political periods ($p = .015$; $M = 3.93$; $DS = 1.401$), as well as their perception of the usefulness of these services ($p = .017$; $M = 3.51$; $DS = 1.024$), but not their use during electoral campaigns ($p = .101$; $M = 3.29$; $DS = 1.510$). In terms of education level, citizens with a university education exhibit the highest values in the political use of these digital channels during regular periods ($M = 4.06$; $DS = 1.333$) and perceive them as highly useful ($M = 3.54$; $DS = 0.997$) (Table 4). Individuals with elementary and secondary education levels show very similar values across the analysed aspects (Table 4).

Table 4. Citizen use of mobile instant messaging services and the perception of their usefulness for citizen participation according to education level

	SCHOOL GRADUATION OR LESS		SECONDARY EDUCATION		UNIVERSITY EDUCATION		ANOVA
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	p
Use in the regular period	3.77	1.145	3.79	1.467	4.06	1.333	.015***
Use in the electoral campaign	3.02	1.550	3.24	1.540	3.36	1.481	0.101
Perception of usefulness for political participation	3.48	1.141	3.48	1.049	3.54	.997	.017***

***p<.05

Source: created by the authors

The ANOVA test indicates a statistically significant relationship between ideology and the use of mobile instant messaging services both during the electoral campaign periods ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,29$; $DS = 1.510$) and outside of them ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,93$; $DS = 1.401$), as well as in the perception of their usefulness for political participation ($p = .006$; $M = 3,51$; $DS = 1.024$). The data reveals that individuals who are ideologically aligned with the moderate right tend to use these mobile digital platforms most frequently for political activities during regular periods ($M = 4.14$; $DS = 1.202$), while during electoral campaigns, individuals from the radical left demonstrate the highest usage rate of these services for political purposes ($M = 3.75$; $D = 1.462$). Finally, individuals identifying with the centre ideology, whose ideology is more moderate, fall in an intermediate position in both scenarios. Those who identify as apolitical, i.e., those who consider themselves disengaged from politics, exhibit the lowest usage values (Table 5). Regarding the perception of usefulness, citizens aligned with the moderate right wing again report the highest values ($M = 3.70$; $DS = 0.983$), while apolitical individuals register the lowest levels ($M = 3.14$; $DS = 1.204$) (Table 5).

Table 5. Citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services and their perceived usefulness for citizen participation according to ideology

	RADICAL LEFT		MODERATE LEFT		CENTRE		MODERATE RIGHT		EXTREME RIGHT		APOLITICAL		ANOVA
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	p	DS	M	DS	M	DS	p
Use in the regular period	4.13	1.268	3.85	1.426	4.07	1.29	4.14	1.202	4.04	1.191	3.49	1.727	<.001*
Use in electoral campaigns	3.75	1.462	3.30	1.44	3.39	1.47	3.49	1.403	3.58	1.359	2.67	1.510	<.001*
Perception of usefulness for political participation	3.42	1.070	3.50	.980	3.58	.983	3.70	.903	3.62	1.153	3.14	1.204	.006**

* $p < .001$; ** $p < 0.1$

Source: created by the authors

Interest in politics shows a statistically significant relationship with the three variables studied according to the ANOVA test (Table 6). This implies that it is a factor capable of determining the use of mobile instant messaging services both during the electoral campaign ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,29$; $DS = 1.510$) and outside the campaign ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,93$; $DS = 1.401$), as well as their perceived usefulness for political participation ($p = <.001$; $M = 3,51$; $DS = 1.024$). The data analysis shows that the more interested citizens are in political affairs, the more they use these mobile applications for political participation and the greater their perceived usefulness. Thus, individuals who are very interested in politics register the highest values both during the regular period ($M = 4.36$; $DS = 1.112$) and the electoral campaign ($M = 3.82$; $DS = 1.299$), and are, in turn, those who perceive their utility for participating in the country's democratic issues with the most incredible intensity ($M = 4.00$, $DS = 0.912$) (Table 6). In contrast, those with little or no interest in politics have correspondingly lower values (Table 6).

Table 6. Citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services and their perceived usefulness for citizen participation according to Interest in Politics

	NOT AT ALL		VERY LITTLE, ALMOST NOTHING		SOMEWHAT		QUITE A LOT		A LOT		ANOVA p
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	
Use in a regular period	3.31	1.829	3.40	1.62	3.90	1.344	3.90	1.344	4.36	1.122	<.001*
Use in the electoral campaign	2.65	1.756	2.61	1.523	3.05	1.501	3.54	1.286	3.82	1.299	<.001*
Perception of usefulness for political participation	3.04	1.339	2.90	1.007	3.32	.920	3.59	.871	4.00	.912	<.001*

*p<.001

Source: created by the authors

Finally, the ANOVA test results indicate no statistically significant relationship between citizens' intention to vote and any of the three variables analysed. Whether individuals intend to vote or not is not a factor that conditions citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services for political purposes, neither during electoral campaigns (p= .629; M= 3,29; DS= 1.510) nor outside of them (p= .083; M= 3,93; DS= 1.401) nor in their perception of the usefulness of these services (p= .156; M= 3,52; DS= 1.024). Upon analysing the results of this variable, it becomes evident that there is no clear predominance of those who intend to vote compared to those who do not, and vice versa. There is also no significant trend among undecided citizens either. Consequently, users who do intend to vote are the ones who most frequently use mobile instant messaging services during both regular periods (M=4.01; DS=1.327) and electoral campaigns (M=3.41; DS=1.455), and they also perceive these mobile applications as highly useful (M=3.58; DS=0.964) (Table 7).

Table 7. Citizen use of mobile instant messaging services and their perceived usefulness for citizen participation according to intention to vote

	NO		YES		I DON'T KNOW YET		ANOVA
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	p
Use in a regular period	3.57	1.652	4.01	1.327	3.68	1.590	.083
Use in electoral	2.90	1.651	3.41	1.455	2.83	1.619	.629
Perception of the usefulness of political participation	3.27	1.204	3.58	.964	3.21	1.203	.156

Source: created by the authors

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study analyses citizens' use of mobile instant messaging services for political participation and their perceived utility in this context. Furthermore, it examines the influence of certain sociopolitical factors on the variables related to this political activity and its perceived usefulness. The findings provide valuable insights for identifying several significant contributions within an exploratory framework.

Our findings indicate that mobile instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Telegram have become indispensable tools for citizens today. This is reflected in the fact that over 90% of respondents use such mobile instant messaging services for political purposes, with more than half using them daily. Moreover, users who have never used them do not exceed 13% of the total. Therefore, a high average usage rate indicates that these technological tools have been incorporated into citizens' daily lives for political activities (RQ1). This reinforces the results of previous studies (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero Ripollés, 2022) that identify the use of these mobile digital platforms by citizens to participate in public affairs, whether it be by staying informed about current affairs, posting their opinions or sharing news of interest. This widespread use of these platforms by citizens can be attributed to the effect that, according to Marcos-García and Tirado-García (2022), parties seek when using these platforms to leverage direct and private communication that characterises these mobile applications to engage citizens and encourage them to participate in political issues.

Our findings also allow us to identify original trends in citizens' comparative use of mobile instant messaging services during and outside electoral campaigns. Despite a generally high usage rate, citizens use these digital platforms more frequently during regular political periods and use decreases during election time (RQ1). This is particularly interesting if we take into account that, according to previous literature, electoral campaigns are the time when parties intensify their communication activity and social media presence (Elishar-Malka, Ariel and Weimann, 2020; Stier et al., 2018; Vergeer, 2015). Therefore, our results detect a relevant contradiction: the increase in the use of mobile applications by political parties coincides with

decreased usage by citizens, who use these digital platforms less frequently during this period. This may have implications for the effectiveness of political actors using mobile instant messaging services as an electoral campaign tool.

The results reveal a medium-high level regarding the perceived usefulness of citizens' use of mobile instant messaging platforms for political participation. This, in turn, is consistent with the high usage rates of these platforms (RQ2). Thus, citizens generally consider these applications useful for political participation and subsequently use them frequently for this purpose. In this regard, Karapanos, Teixeira and Gouveia (2016) view that citizens turn to these services because they feel safer expressing their opinions openly in a closed environment, thereby avoiding discomfort and potential criticism present on more open social networks like Facebook or Twitter, could be decisive in explaining this fact.

Finally, our findings underscore the influence of certain sociopolitical factors on both the usage and citizens' perception of mobile instant messaging services about politics. A statistically significant relationship allows us to affirm that factors such as gender, ideology and interest in politics influence all the variables analysed. In contrast, factors such as intention to vote do not influence any of them (RQ3). Men, right-wing citizens, and those with a heightened interest in politics are more inclined to use these platforms and perceive them as being more useful for political issues. These results represent a novel contribution since the impact of these variables on the perception and political use of mobile instant messaging services in the Spanish context has not been previously analysed. Therefore, this study represents a highly original contribution to the field of digital political communication.

This research aims to enhance our understanding of the use of mobile instant messaging services for public activity and the perception of their usefulness for citizen participation, considering various sociopolitical factors. However, while the sample is representative, it would be valuable to adopt a comparative approach to juxtapose these findings with those from other countries. Such an approach would help determine these platforms' role in diverse sociopolitical contexts, offering a potential avenue for future research.

Despite its limitations, this is one of the first studies to examine citizens' use and perception of mobile instant messaging services. Consequently, it provides relevant data for political parties and public institutions to manage these tools and devise their communication strategies, which can have significant potential and relevance for enhancing their impact on citizens' political participation.

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7. Specific contributions of each author

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Methodology	Alejandra Tirado-García and Andreu Casero-Ripollés
Data collection and analysis	Alejandra Tirado-García and Andreu Casero-Ripollés
Discussion and conclusions	Alejandra Tirado-García and Andreu Casero-Ripollés
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Alejandra Tirado-García and Andreu Casero-Ripollés

8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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