

# Do the media create polarization? The media coverage of the 28 May (28M) election campaign in the Autonomous Region of Murcia

## ¿Polarizan los medios? La cobertura mediática en la campaña electoral del 28M en la Región de Murcia



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**Abstract:**

Can media coverage during election campaigns be considered polarizing? Is the media content we consume neutral, especially during periods of heightened political activity, or does it encourage social division into two opposing ideological camps? In an attempt to answer these questions, the media coverage and polarizing content of the 2023 Murcia Regional elections were analysed, specifically regarding television broadcasts, including those of *La 7* and *La 1 of TVE* in its territorial broadcasting, as well as regional press outlets *La Verdad* and *La Opinión*. By using a content analysis methodology, the results indicate that the news disseminated by the media did not appear to transmit significant polarization in the Murcia Region during the election campaign of 28M.

**Keywords:**

Press; television; election campaign; media; polarization.

**Resumen:**

*¿La cobertura que realizan los medios de comunicación en campaña electoral puede considerarse polarizante? ¿Son los contenidos mediáticos que consumimos, sobre todo en periodos de mayor actividad política, neutrales o alientan la división social en dos polos ideológicos enfrentados? Para tratar de responder a estas cuestiones se analiza la cobertura de los medios de comunicación y los contenidos polarizantes, durante el periodo de campaña electoral autonómica de 2023 en la Región de Murcia, concretamente la televisión (*La 7* y *La 1 de TVE* en su emisión territorial) y la prensa regional (*La Verdad* y *La Opinión*). A partir del análisis de contenido como técnica metodológica, los resultados apuntan a que la información transmitida por los medios no parece presentar una polarización destacable en la Región de Murcia durante la campaña electoral del 28M.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Prensa; televisión; campaña electoral; medios de comunicación; polarización.*

## 1. Introduction

The media have historically played a fundamental role in the development and consolidation of democracies by providing citizens with information that is independent of ideological positions (Villafranco Robles, 2005), all of which is combined with the building of greater trust in institutions (Norris, 2000). In addition to guaranteeing the development of democracies, this situation has also encouraged audiences to consume media products (Mani and Echeverría, 2019). The guarantee offered by the media can be seen in the narrative strategies of journalists, which emphasise democracy and essential values such as a commitment to public service (Cornejo Urbina, 2022).

This research addresses not only the role of the media, but their content as well, referring specifically to the possible polarizing nature of their informative messages. Polarization perceived by audiences can lead to a communication scenario that fosters an informative offering further away from ideological centre, with more extreme editorial lines (Majó Vázquez and González Bailón, 2022). This situation is exacerbated by a scenario in which ideology, social behaviour, and the perception of reality are usually subordinated to the power of constructing polarization (Blanco and De la Corte, 2003). These issues are fundamental pillars that allow agents such as the media to act as social elites, which have the power to take stances and adopt beliefs that are part of the dynamic role acquired by newsrooms (Martín Baró, 2003; Villa Gómez *et al.*, 2020). In addition, nearly half of Spanish people (49%) believe that the media are very distant from each other ideologically, having become agents that have the capability of fostering political polarization (Vara *et al.*, 2022).

This study addresses the media coverage during the 2023 electoral campaign in the Autonomous Region of Murcia. As such, the aim of the research is to analyse the content of media agendas in the 28M election campaign in the Murcia Region, and whether the messages broadcast contained polarizing features. Consequently, the research question set forth is the following: With regard to the content of the media agenda in the 28M election campaign in the Murcia Region, how can it be described?

The media addressed in this paper include television and the digital version of the press. As the quintessential media outlet (De Casas Moreno *et al.*, 2020), television reflects a powerful version of reality by combining visual and auditory fields, making it a channel with great influence on public opinion. Added to this idea is the agility and simplicity of television language, and the ease with which viewers can understand the news (Fernández, 2006). On the other hand, the press has been an essential media outlet for information related to deciding how to vote (Nir and Druckman, 2008). Despite this situation, the pressure for immediacy and the new informative mechanisms make it necessary to redefine productive routines and the development of informative content based on these information structures (Barrios Rubio and Gutiérrez García, 2022). This means that the new informative mechanisms are transferring consumption to the digital environment, with the media becoming the agents that respond to these needs through digitisation of their content, facilitating widespread access to political information (Casero Ripollés, 2016).

### *1.1. The media as a mobilising agent*

The relentless volume of information circulating in the digital ecosystem has an impact on the prestige, trust, and credibility of traditional media in facing new audiences (Silva Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022). Its power lies in the crucial work of building content that is memorable, extensive, and immersed in narratives (Canel and Sanders, 2005). Exposure to the media can occur through different mechanisms, yet all of them appeal to ideology and semantics, with the aim of influencing political and governmental agendas, and ultimately public affairs (Cornejo Urbina, 2022).

However, added to this focus on ideological influence is the relationship between politics and communication, which not only has an impact on political governance, but also on the shaping of public opinion and the development of content for mediated audiences (Castells, 2009). This set of ideas is reinforced by the work of confirmation and refutation exercised by the media to cognitively and affectively pose questions based on their pre-existing narratives, which update an already known model of the world (Aruguete and Calvo, 2023).

When addressing the relationship between the media and the rest of the actors involved, diverse theories that have delved into the effects of the media must be addressed. The origin of such research dates back to the predominance of what is known as the *direct effect paradigm*, or *magic bullet theory*, which held that “the audience is a passive and malleable entity upon which media messages would always have an impact” (Igartua and Humanes, 2004: 204). This idea consisted of creating pseudo-events based on the behaviour of individuals who rejected everything that did not happen in the media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2006; Aruguete, 2015). Between the 1940s and 1960s, this tradition was reversed. The theory of media effects that predominated at the time, or in other words, the well-known *minimal effects hypothesis*, pointed out that the media had almost no effect on public opinion. During this period, audiences played a key role by selecting the messages to which they wanted to focus their attention, interpreting them, and finally assimilating them (Ardévol Abreu *et al.*, 2020).

After considerable criticism in the 1950s by authors who rejected the limited power of the media (Lang and Lang, 1955; Cohen, 1963; Semetko, 1995), the *agenda-setting theory* emerged (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Based on this theory, the authors concluded that “over time, issues highlighted in the news were eventually considered important by the public” (McCombs, 2006: 29). This traditional concept is divided into two levels: the first addresses topic diversity, which is the result of media consumption. Thus, the objective of the first level emphasizes the variety of issues used in the agendas, while the second level of agenda-setting went a step further and highlighted the aspects, characteristics, or attributes used by the media to describe those issues. As such, the key was no longer which issue predominated, but how that issue was covered (Crespo and Melero, 2022).

## 1.2. Content and polarizing rhetoric

One of the inherent features of the media in terms of its role in political control refers to the type of messages transmitted, which can exert considerable influence over the citizenry. An example might be the provocation of polarizing feelings when they speak in a derogatory and aggressive tone about the “others”, who are seen as the enemy of their own audiences (McCombs, 2006). One pioneering study shows how polarizing semantics have increased in the media, specifically on US television since 2016. To reach this conclusion, they conducted a comparative analysis of two different television channels by analysing identical and politically controversial keywords. Specifically, in their on-air language CNN and Fox News were more semantically diverse in their use of key words such as “racist”, “racism”, “black criminal”, “immigrant”, “immigration”, “climate change”, “global warming”, and “healthcare” (Ding, Horning and Rho, 2023). Although not the objective of this research, it is highly important to associate polarizing media content with the use of emotion. Moreover, harmful emotions such as disgust or hatred are the ones that appear most often in electoral campaigns, an example of which is the elections of the Autonomous Region of Madrid in 2021 (Moret Soler *et al.*, 2022), or that of the United States in 2020 (Domínguez García *et al.*, 2023).

In Spain, people who are politically informed display a profile that is emotionally active and with a greater presence of negative emotions. The media act as an interpretative framework of feelings by directly influencing attitudes, and offering not only a cognitive approach, but one that is emotional as well (Cazorla *et al.*, 2022). In addition, they no longer reflect merely ideological affiliation, but they also produce content to increase rejection and victimisation. This is due to the fact that in today’s communications, polarizing media discourses attract audiences and advertising. Likewise, they construct news to intensify fear and feed prejudice in their audiences (Waisbord, 2020). In this way, the media end up not only determining the most important content, but also making positive or negative interpretations of certain topics (Rubio, 2009).

Therefore, polarization occurs when the stance of one group implies a negative reference to the viewpoint of another group, considering it to be a rival. This phenomenon is a dynamic process of social forces in which the approach to one of the standpoints involves both the distancing and active rejection of the other (Martín, 2003).

Frames involving the media, political discourse, and meaning are all productive instruments for structuring the features of polarizing narratives during electoral campaigns (Muñiz *et al.*, 2022). Among the variety of frames that exist, that of conflict, which dates back to Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), is crucial for analysing the strategies used by political leaders in their discourse, and for examining the adaptation of this discourse to media coverage. These frames refer to conflicting interests that have a detrimental effect on citizens, as they tend to focus on negativity and on the qualities of other leaders, parties, groups or

institutions (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). This framing has been the object of various studies involving inductive approaches, as in the case of Lind and Salo (2002). Through content analysis, these authors identified six frames associated with the media coverage of feminism.

Along with polarization, other concepts such as negativity in the media itself can be triggers for a greater or lesser amount of polarizing content in the media. Lengauer *et al.* (2011) propose five features that determine the degree of negativity of a news item: tone, confliction, incapability, depiction, and pessimism. Moreover, other issues such as the lack of security, immigration, and the inner workings of democracy tend to be treated with higher levels of negativity due to their inherent features of polarization and social confrontation (Esser *et al.*, 2016). Finally, numerous studies have argued that the characteristics of a particular media outlet can determine its level of negativity (Takens *et al.*, 2013).

In the present study, the following frames have been identified, which are related to the previously mentioned frame of *conflict*: the presence of sharp criticism; the use of insulting language; mentioning the danger of actions taken; comments about changing the rules of the game; irresponsible and contradictory attitudes of the actors; protagonist vs. adversary; juxtaposed stances; use of competitive terms; using warfare language; and describing the opponent using negative terms. As mentioned above, along with the frames used for the present analysis, negativity complements the measurement of polarization in media content.

## 2. Methodologies and data

With the aim of analysing the content of media agendas in the 28M election campaign in the Murcia Region, and discovering whether the messages issued contain polarizing features, diverse media such as the press and television were consulted during the campaign, which ran from 12-16 May, 2023.

Likewise, the following research question is posed: How can the content that comprises the media agenda in the election campaign of 28 May in the Murcia Region be described?

With regard to the press, the newspapers analysed were the digital versions of *La Verdad* and *La Opinión* as they are the two media with the highest volume of political content at the regional level, according to the General Media Study (Avante, 2023). The units of analysis were drawn from each newspaper's editorials, opinion articles, and news items related to the subject in question. In the coding, the order used was the title of the article, subtitle, and the text. Given that media content in digital format is modified and altered up to three times during the course of one day, the compilation of the analysis units was carried out each day in the early hours of the morning.

In the case of television, the news programmes of *La 7* and *La 1* of *TVE* were analysed. Television viewing increased by 1.74% in 2022 compared to 2021, even surpassing news consumed through the Internet (Avante, 2023). Coding the units was carried out from the beginning to the end of the journalistic coverage, so when the topic changed, the analysis of a new unit began. Given the characteristics of the media, both the presentation of the news item by the journalist and the subsequent images detailing the news item in the same unit were analysed. The analysis content consisted of news items that addressed political issues, with priority given to the topics included in the initial rundown of the newscast. The news programmes analysed were *Noticias Edición Mediodía* of *La 7*, and *Noticias Murcia* of *La 1-TVE*, both of which aired at 2 p.m.

For the treatment of the compiled data, a content analysis was used as the research technique to examine the media. This method is considered a systematic, objective, and quantitative way to analyse the characteristics of a message (Neuendorf, 2002), by taking a purely descriptive approach. Moreover, this technique enables valid inferences to be drawn, reproduced, and applied to a given context. The purpose of this tool is to provide knowledge and concordance in the field of communication (Krippendorff, 1997). Likewise, evaluation and coding must be uniform and analysed by using the same criteria (Igartua and Humanes, 2004; Piñuel Raigada, 2002).

To analyse the polarizing content in the media, variables linked to agenda-setting have been used to reveal the main topics (McCombs, 2006), in addition to a series of concepts related to negativity in the media. This negativity is linked to the electoral system in which the metaphors of war, competition, and the perception of candidates and polls, among other factors, become overly important (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Its measurement is made possible by analysing information that is positive, negative or neutral, for the purpose of determining the degree of negativity (Soroka and McAdams, 2015) and polarization (Robles *et al.*, 2022) that is most common in media content.

The variables used to monitor media coverage, polarization and negativity in the media are as follows:

**Table 1. Analysis variables**

Identification variables	
News date	XX/XX/XXXX
Media type	Television or the press.
Name of the media analysed	<i>La 7, La 1 of TVE, La Verdad and La Opinión.</i>
Topic content variables	
Main topic	This enables identification of the predominant topics in the agendas, i.e., it covers the first level of the agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).
Subtopics	A series of specific subtopics is broken down from each main topic.
Variables of political polarization in the media	
Presence of sharp criticism	Contains a direct and specific attack on a well-known political leader or party, it is also coded according to which actor is the target of the attack.
Presence of journalists' opinions	Contains opinions of the journalists who report the news on an issue.
Perception of rigor	The consumer perceives that it is presented in a rigorous, truthful, and ethical manner without indicating any opinion about the issue.

Tone	Addresses the emotional dimension of the second level of agenda-setting (positive, negative, or neutral) (McCombs, 2006).
Presence of insulting language	Insulting or offensive terms are used to address other political actors -coded dichotomously (yes or no).
Mentioning the danger of actions taken	A political actor, or the actions carried out by such a person, might pose a danger to society.
Comments about changing the rules of the game	This refers to possibly changing of the rules of the game for the actor's or political party's own benefit based on ideological interests.
Irresponsible and contradictory attitudes of the actors	The attitude of a leader or political actor is irresponsible or illegitimate with regard to the prevailing values and principles of the society. This variable is coded dichotomously (yes or no).
Protagonist vs. adversary	There is a verbal attack by one actor or party against another with the aim of highlighting the differences between the two.
Juxtaposed stances	This is appraised if large groups are created that are far apart on the issue being analysed, and if allusions are made to terms that put distance between the groups. Coded dichotomously (yes or no).
Use of competitive terms	Nouns, adjectives, or verbs that denote competitiveness and conflict are used. Coded dichotomously (yes or no).
Using warfare language	Terms linked to the field of war, such as battle, combat, weapons, etc. This variable is coded dichotomously (yes or no).
Describing the opponent using negative terms	An actor or political party is identified using negative terms that foment rejection, which can be interpreted as an insult. Coded dichotomously (yes or no).

**Source: created by the authors**

As previously mentioned, the media analysed are those that have a larger audience at the regional level. Apart from having a regional scope, the two daily newspapers consulted, which include *La Verdad* of the Vocento Group, and *La Opinión* of the Prensa Ibérica Group, also have higher readership compared to other media in the Murcia Region. In the case of television, *La 7* is the regional public television channel of Murcia, while *La 1* (of RTVE) is a national public television channel, whose analysed programme is part of its daily regional coverage (Avante, 2023).

Based on the aforementioned criteria and variables, the units of analysis collected are as follows:

**Table 2. Analysis units**

		Number	%
<b>Digital press</b>	<i>La Opinión</i>	57	51.4%
	<i>La Verdad</i>	54	48.6%
	Total (press)	111	100%
<b>Television</b>	<i>La 7</i>	82	64.1%
	<i>La 1</i>	46	35.9%
	Total (television)	128	100%

Source: created by the authors

Coding the analysis units was carried out by a team of four researchers by using the previously mentioned codebook. Excel was employed as the data collection tool. Afterward, the IBM SPSS Statistics 28 programme was used to analyse the information.

Regarding the reliability coefficient, two collaborators from the Public Policy Chair of the University of Murcia calculated the intercoder reliability based on re-coding 12% of the total sample. The results obtained using the Holsti method indicated that the results were reliable (.72).

### 2.1. The political context of 28M in the Murcia Region

On 28 May, 2023, municipal and regional elections were held in the Autonomous Region of Murcia in Spain. With only 45 seats, the Murcia Regional Assembly is the fourth smallest regional parliament in Spain. The only ones that are smaller include Castilla-La Mancha, La Rioja, and Cantabria, with the same number of seats as the Principality of Asturias (García Escribano, 2015).

The scenario faced by the inhabitants of the Murcia Region in electing representatives in its XI Legislature resulted from a failed attempt at a motion of censure in 2021. At that time, *Ciudadanos* severed its relationship with the *Partido Popular (PP)*, with whom it had shared power in the regional government, and presented a motion of censure together with the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)*, which eventually failed (Caballero, 2023). Various political parties were nominated for the regional elections. The most prominent, due to their previous representation in the Regional Assembly, were the following: *Partido Popular (PP)*, with candidate Fernando López Miras; *Partido Socialista de la Región de Murcia (PSRM)*, whose candidate was José Vélez; *Ciudadanos*, with candidate María José Ros; *VOX*, with José Ángel Antelo; and *Unidas Podemos*, with María Marín. This miscellany of actors occurred despite the fact that over the years, the Murcia Region has had several presidents, all from the *Partido Popular*, which has been governing the Region continuously since 1995, either with absolute majorities or through political alliances.

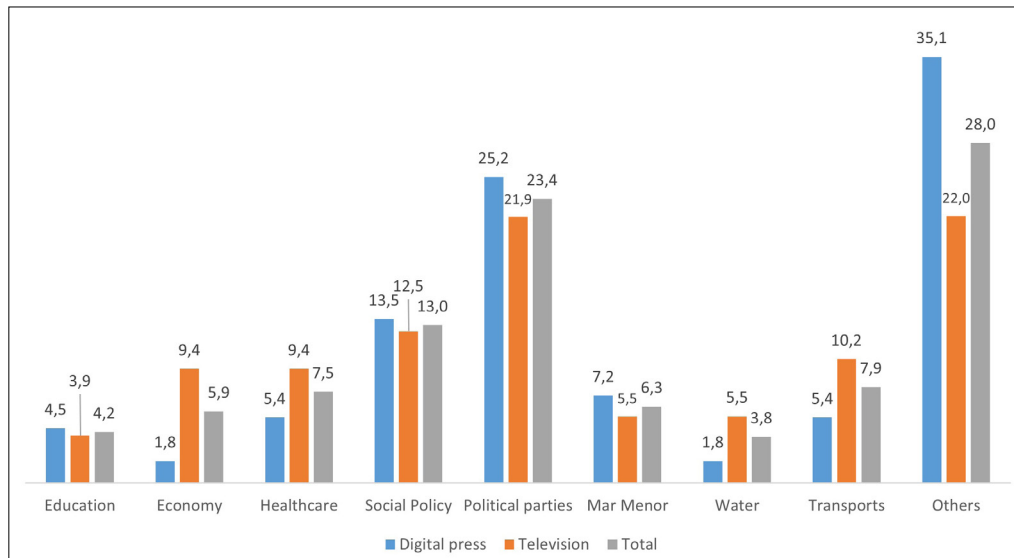
According to pre-election polls carried out by CEMOP, 2023, the expected winner was *Partido Popular (PP)* with an estimated 28.8% of the votes and 22 seats<sup>1</sup>, close to an absolute majority of 23, with a candidate who had already served as president of the Region. This meant that he had an advantage over his adversaries. Second place was expected to be taken by *PSRM* (16.4%), with an estimated 12-13 seats, and third place was envisioned for *VOX* (12.4%), which was forecast to obtain between eight and nine representatives. Further behind were *Unidas Podemos* (4.3%) and *Ciudadanos* (1.3%), the latter of which was excluded from the Regional Assembly of Murcia, as the minimum for these elections was 3%.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Analysis of the media content in relation to issues

To analyse the media coverage of the 28M campaign in the Murcia Region, the main topics were compiled in order to reveal the leading issues in the two weeks prior to the elections.

**Graph 1. Principal media topics in the 28M elections (%)**



Source: created by the authors

<sup>1</sup> At the time of this writing, and after the elections were held, the results were as follows: *PP*, 22 seats; *PSRM*, 13 seats; *VOX*, 9 seats; and *Unidas Podemos*, 2 seats.

Both in the press and on television, the most frequently covered topics were political parties, followed by social policy, healthcare, and the *Mar Menor*<sup>2</sup> crisis. In evaluating the differences between both media, it has been observed that all the issues mentioned have a greater presence in the press than on television, except for healthcare, which stands out on television, yet with only slight differences between both media. Moreover, issues such as the economy, transportation, and communication are more prominent on television news. In general, there is a predominance of topics with an ideological component, also known as public policy issues (Mazzoleni, 2010), which are typical of campaign periods and aim to highlight the main problems of citizens and the solutions or proposals of each candidate.

To reveal the specific features of each topic, details were provided regarding the subtopics, and although they were connected to the main topics, they were intended to offer more detailed information on the issues highlighted by the regional media during the campaign.

**Table 3. The main subtopics of the media in the 28M elections (%)**

	Press	Television	Total
Campaign events	10.8	11.7	11.3
The so-called “sufficient majority” of López Miras	14.4	3.9	8.8
Election debates	12.6	2.3	7.1
Election forecasts	6.3	6.3	6.3
Transportation and communication in cities and towns	2.7	8.6	5.9
Housing	4.5	6.3	5.4
The <i>Mar Menor</i> crisis: solutions and accountability	6.3	3.9	5
Lowering taxes for the middle class	0	7	3.8
The closing of the <i>Tajo-Segura</i> water pipeline: solutions and accountability	1.8	4.7	3.3
Hospital waiting lists	1.8	4.7	3.3

2 When social policy and healthcare issues are addressed, reference is made to public services related to education, dependency, social services, healthcare, and others, yet when comments are made about the *Mar Menor* situation, these denote content associated with the preservation and recovery of this natural resource of the Murcia Region. The *Mar Menor* is the largest saltwater lagoon in Europe, which for some years has been suffering ecological deterioration as a result of pollution, agricultural exploitation, *DANAS*, and tourism, among many other casuistries identified by experts. Given the characteristics of this natural asset, it is protected under the auspices of both regional and national governments, and its maintenance, recovery, improvement, and management was one of the key issues in the 28M election campaign in the Murcia Region.

Sports	2.7	3.1	2.9
Assistance for disadvantaged people and families	3.6	1.6	2.5
Budget of the Ministry of Education	1.8	2.3	2.1
Accusations of vote-buying	1.8	1.6	1.7
Others	29	32	30.6
Total	100	100	100

Source: created by the authors

Contrary to what occurs in the main topics, the subtopics have a predominance of content related to the campaign. This typology refers to messages associated with campaign organisation and other strategies that end up becoming news. Based on this classification, there are also political topics, or in other words, issues related to the political-electoral situation and the ideological viewpoints of the candidates and parties. One example is the subtopic related to the “sufficient majority” of López Miras, which refers to the minimum number of votes that would allow him to govern alone without the support of other political parties, in this case *VOX*. This topic, together with the issue of electoral debates, is more prominent in the press than on television, as this type of content is often more prevalent in opinion articles or in the reflections of journalists covering the news. Along with these topics, campaign events and election forecasts are part of the typology of political and electoral campaign issues, which stand out contextually during election campaigns.

Regarding the actors or protagonists of the media news, it has been observed that the most frequently mentioned are the candidates for President of the Murcia Regional Government. In other words, Fernando López Miras (*PP*) heads the list with a 20.9% presence in the units analysed; in second place is José Vélez (*PSRM*) with 16.7%; next is María José Ros (*Ciudadanos*) at 10%; José Ángel Antelo (*VOX*) has 8.4%; and María Marín (*Unidas Podemos*) has 6.7%.

The scarce presence of national leaders indicates that the media campaign focused mainly on the top regional candidates and their parties, contrasting the leadership and personalisation exercised by party representatives in regional politics (Laguna Platero, 2011). In the case of the Murcia Region, the main protagonist was Fernando López Miras, who was the regional president at the time. As a result, the media, and especially television, tend to offer more expanded coverage of these leaders’ messages (Rodríguez Virgili *et al.*, 2014). This increase in content, together with the personalisation of the leaders, not only encompasses the President of the Autonomous Region of Murcia, but also the candidates who have greater representation in their chambers, which is the case of José Vélez. The rest of the candidates, despite being among the most prominent with regard to parties, national leaders, associations, institutions and companies, are unable to achieve a level of influence similar to that of the two candidates who belong to the parties with the greatest representation, which are the *PP* and *PSRM* in the Murcia Region.

### 3.2. Analysis of political polarization in the media

The presence of verbal attacks during election campaigns is one of the variables that has allowed the authors to study negativity and polarization in the media, as media outlets are crucial sources of information during campaign periods. Moreover, citizens' dependence on the media tends to increase during such periods in order to satisfy their information needs (Muñiz, 2022; Bjarnøe *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, if the messages of the media shift toward conflict, citizens will perceive it as such, and this could generate a certain level of political polarization and rejection of the opponent, among other aftereffects. Although analysing the influence of the media on individuals would involve a broader examination not addressed in this paper, the authors of the present study have explored the discursive tools used by the media to cover confrontational messages that might have an impact on citizens.

**Table 4. The presence of verbal attacks in the media analysed during the campaign (%)**

	Press		Television	
	<i>La Opinión</i>	<i>La Verdad</i>	<i>La 7</i>	<i>La 1</i>
None	35.1	31.5	53.7	56.5
Yes, against Fernando López Miras	21.1	33.3	11.0	6.5
Yes, against Pepe Vélez	1.8	3.7	0.0	0.0
Yes, against José Ángel Antelo	0.0	1.9	0.0	0.0
Yes, against María Marín	7.0	3.7	0.0	0.0
Yes, against the Autonomous Region of Murcia (CARM), or Murcia Regional Government	7.0	5.6	12.2	8.7
Yes, against the PP	5.3	7.4	4.9	10.9
Yes, against the PSOE	1.8	1.9	2.4	0.0
Yes, against VOX	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Yes, against Ciudadanos	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Yes, against Unidas Podemos	0.0	1.9	0.0	0.0
Yes, against the Spanish National Government	12.1	7.2	9.7	10.9
Yes, against another actor or entity	7.0	1.9	6.1	6.5
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: created by the authors

In 28M campaign in the Murcia Region, the highest percentages can be found in the category of *none* with regard to verbal attacks. This indicates that a significant percentage of the media's coverage did not include any verbal attacks, especially on television, where more than half of the news on *La 7* and *La 1* do not use this media strategy to generate political polarization in their content. This percentage is lower in the case of the press, as more verbal attacks were detected in this medium, the vast majority of which were directed at the president of the regional government, Fernando López Miras. Specifically, *La Verdad* published a higher number of attacks on the regional president, as this outlet was more critical of the *PP* candidate than the rest of the media analysed. Sharp verbal attacks on both the regional and national governments of Spain also stand out<sup>3</sup>.

An example of this kind of attack on leaders and institutions was made against Fernando López Miras in an opinion article in *La Opinión*, which read, "The PP, led by López Miras, lacks identity and ambition in this campaign. The governing parties cannot resolve the election situation through populist measures and by correcting their adversaries. Influential politicians must be knowledgeable about how to foresee what they call the framework, and they must establish a model for the Murcia Region that involves a true majority, not just 'the sufficient majority' to continue doing things the same way as always".

**Table 5. The presence of the journalists' opinions in the media analysed (%)**

	Digital press		Television	
	<i>La Opinión</i>	<i>La Verdad</i>	<i>La 7</i>	<i>La 1</i>
None	54.4	75.9	95.1	100.0
Yes. They make a joke, wisecrack or humorous comments	5.3	3.7	0.0	0.0
Yes. They appear serious	3.5	1.9	1.2	0.0
Yes. They show concern	3.5	3.7	2.4	0.0
Yes. They display doubtfulness	3.5	1.9	0.0	0.0
Yes. They clearly express their opinion	29.8	13.0	1.2	0.0
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: created by the authors

Objectivity has always been one of the pillars of journalism. The construction of frames and the use of framing to transmit real life situations is one of the main premises that distinguishes the personal opinion of journalists from factual news (Sádaba, 2008).

3 The Government of Spain that is currently in power was forged through a left-wing coalition of the *PSOE* and *Unidas Podemos*, in which the presidency is held by Pedro Sánchez, who is the leader of the *PSOE*. As a result, the main attacks linked to this institution might be due to pro-regional, governmental personalities, as a result of their wide diversity in exercising governmental authority.

In the case at hand, it can be observed that in all the units analysed from *La 1*, and in 95.1% of those of *La 7*, the objectivity of journalists has been defended to the utmost. The percentage is also high for the digital press, with *La Verdad* standing out at the rate of nearly 76% of the units analysed, and 54.4% for *La Opinión*. As such, the research data indicate that *La Opinión* is the newspaper that displays its opinion the most at 29.8%. A possible explanation for this tendency is that the verbal attacks directed at Fernando López Miras could be a strategy orchestrated by *La Opinión* itself. Thus, it appears that *La Opinión* took a more critical stance toward the Regional Government than the rest of the media analysed.

An example of such criticism, based on analysing the results of an election survey of this media, is the following comment: “The only option for regional government has a name of its own, Fernando López Miras, who has within his reach **the ‘sufficient’ or ‘required’ majority**, to which the *PP* has incessantly made reference during this election campaign”.

**Table 6. The presence in the media analysed of danger regarding actions taken (%)**

	Digital press		Television	
	<i>La Opinión</i>	<i>La Verdad</i>	<i>La 7</i>	<i>La 1</i>
None	59.6	57.4	53.7	60.9
Yes, regarding the economy of the Murcia Region	7.0	7.4	15.9	23.9
Yes, regarding the economic well-being of individuals (employment, housing, income, etc.)	3.5	3.7	15.9	8.7
Yes, in relation to governmental stability	7.0	5.6	3.7	2.2
Yes, in relation to democracy and liberties	1.8	9.3	8.5	4.3
Yes, regarding the rights of certain groups (women, LGTBIQ+, ethnic minorities, etc.)	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.0
Yes, regarding the region's image abroad	0.0	1.9	0.0	0.0
Yes, regarding other issues	21.1	14.8	1.2	0.0
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: created by the authors

As for mentions regarding the danger of actions taken, referring to whether political actors or their actions might pose a danger to society, there were hardly any comments regarding this issue. However, when such mentions do occur, they appear mainly on television, along with allusions to the risk for the economy of the Autonomous Region of Murcia and the economic well-being of its residents. As the media coverage analysed does not point out political differences, it does generate negativity and political polarization through its content.

One example of comments about the danger to democracy and freedom from taking action has been seen in *La Verdad*, when the second in line for the regional candidacy of the *Podemos-IU-Alianza Verde* coalition, Víctor Egío, made the following statement in a public interview: “The lack of support from the regional government has forced public higher education centres to reduce the number of available spaces for degree programmes and lay off professors”.

**Table 7. Comments about changing the rules of the game in the media analysed (%)**

	Digital press		Television	
	<i>La Opinión</i>	<i>La Verdad</i>	<i>La 7</i>	<i>La 1</i>
None	80.7	77.8	91.5	93.5
Yes, changes regarding parliamentary or decision-making rules	1.8	5.6	0	0
Yes, changes to election rules	14	13	2.4	2.2
Yes, changes to regional government operations and legal procedures	0	1.9	4.9	2.2
Yes, changes to rules related to transparency	1.8	1.9	0	0
Yes, changes to other rules are mentioned	1.8	0	1.2	2.2
Total	100	100	100	100

**Source: created by the authors**

The data reveal a considerable lack of mentions in the media with regard to changing the rules of the game, especially on television, where more than 90% of the units show no evidence of this type of content. However, the press highlights changes to election rules, which might be linked not only to the coverage carried out by the journalists themselves, but also to the importance of opinion articles written by their colleagues in newsrooms.

One of the most controversial cases during the election campaign was *Podemos* candidate María Marín’s refusal to share half of her time in the debate with Helena Vidal of the party known as *Más Región-Verdes Equo*, as ruled by the Electoral Board after the joint candidacy of both parties was presented for the 2019 regional elections. In this case, changes to the rules of the game were reflected as follows: “The debate started as planned, and everything was proceeding as usual until the moment arrived when María Marín had to leave the lectern and hand it over to Helena Vidal. In what was supposed to be the end of her turn, The *Podemos-IU-Alianza Verde* candidate refused to leave the stage, claiming that it seemed “unfair”, and making it clear that “if you want me to leave, you will have to kick me out”.

**Table 8. Confrontational stances of protagonists vs. adversaries in the media analysed (%)**

	Digital press		Television	
	<i>La Opinión</i>	<i>La Verdad</i>	<i>La 7</i>	<i>La 1</i>
None	49.1	48.1	53.7	56.5
Yes, <i>PP</i> vs. <i>PSOE</i>	21.1	27.8	25.6	21.7
Yes, <i>PP</i> vs. <i>Unidas Podemos</i>	1.8	5.6	4.9	2.2
Yes, <i>PSOE</i> vs. <i>VOX</i>	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.0
Yes, <i>VOX</i> vs. <i>Unidas Podemos</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Yes, <i>PP</i> vs. <i>VOX</i>	15.8	5.6	3.7	0.0
Yes, <i>Unidas Podemos</i> vs. <i>PSOE</i>	1.8	3.7	0.0	0.0
Yes, other combinations of discord	10.5	9.3	9.8	19.6
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: created by the authors

Along the same lines, there is a certain presence of confrontational stances between protagonists and adversaries. In this case, the opposing viewpoints are linked, on the one hand, to the two parties with the highest number of representatives in the Regional Assembly (*PP* vs. *PSOE*) and, on the other hand, to the two right-wing parties with a greater chance of governing in coalition according to electoral forecasts (*PP* vs. *VOX*). One explanation for the use of this strategy by the media is to generate opposing and more competitive arenas among the leaders. Regarding the Murcia Region, the polls indicated that the *PP*, *PSRM* and *VOX* were essential in forming a government, especially the *PP* and *VOX*, given that both parties in coalition could exceed the absolute majority. Nevertheless, we cannot leave aside the fact that the *PSRM* is the main opposition party, in addition to being a pillar of regional partisanship.

Television was one of the media that maintained the strategy of confrontation between the *PP* and *PSOE*, an example of which is *La 7*'s coverage of the day after the election debate, highlighted by accusations between the leaders of both parties, Fernando López Miras (*PP*) and José Vélez (*PSOE*), as they accused each other of implementing policies that did not result in a reduction in unemployment compared to the national average.

**Table 9. Dichotomous variables of polarization in the newspapers of the media analysed (%)**

		Digital press	Television
Perception of rigour	No	13.5	2.3
	Yes	86.5	97.7
Presence of insulting language	No	90.1	93.0
	Yes	9.9	7.0
Irresponsible attitudes	No	82.0	61.7
	Yes	18.0	38.3
Juxtaposed stances	No	81.1	59.4
	Yes	18.9	40.6
Use of competitive terms	No	73.0	78.9
	Yes	27.0	21.1
Use of warfare language	No	78.4	85.9
	Yes	21.6	14.1
Describing the opponent using negative terms	No	96.4	88.3
	Yes	3.6	11.7

**Source: created by the authors**

The last variables analysed for the purpose of verifying the degree of political polarization that the media are capable of generating in the Region are linked to the use of terms and frames in their media discourse. In general, the data continue to show that the media did not play an important role in the construction of polarizing news, although it has been observed that certain data make a distinction between press and television coverage. Media comments regarding irresponsible attitudes stand out on television (38.3%), compared to those of the press (18%). The same situation occurs with the juxtaposed stances, where television once again is considerably more prolific in creating confrontational frames (40.6%) compared to the press (18.9%).

### 3.3. Which issues, actors and media are more polarizing?

The results indicate that the vast majority of issues have been addressed using a neutral tone, which ensures impartial news coverage. Only in topics related to election campaigns, such as political parties and the events and acts they organise to obtain votes, is there a greater presence of insulting, competitive, and warlike language, as well as the use of negative adjectives to describe the adversary, as well as irresponsible attitudes and juxtaposed stances to distinguish oneself from the opponents.

Among the media analysed, the tone is mostly neutral in both the press (67.6%) and television (91.4%), and when the tone is perceived as negative (27%), the press is more prominent in this regard. This is related to the formidable objectivity perceived in the treatment of information, as there are hardly any cases in which journalists' opinions are presented. Among the press, *La Opinión* stands out for its use of a negative tone (33.3%) compared to *La Verdad* (20.4%). The opposite occurs with the neutral tone, where *La Verdad* (72.2%) uses it more than *La Opinión* (63.2%). The same situation takes place on television, where all the units of *La 1* are neutral, and about 87% of the news of *La 7* also use this tone. In fact, television could be considered the most neutral medium.

**Table 10. Association between the presidential candidates of the regional government and the variables of polarization in the media analysed (%)**

		Fernando López Miras	José Vélez	José Ángel Antelo	María Marín	María José Ros	Total units
Perception of rigour	Yes	88	100	100	87.5	100	142
	No	12	0	0	12.5	0	8
Presence of insulting language	Yes	12	2.5	20	12.5	8.3	15
	No	88	97.5	80	87.5	220	135
Irresponsible attitudes	Yes	20	37.5	55	56.3	12.3	48
	No	80	62.5	45	43.8	87.5	102
Juxtaposed stances	Yes	26	35	70	37.5	20.8	52
	No	74	65	30	62.5	79.2	98
Use of competitive language	Yes	28	17.5	60	31.3	0	38
	No	72	82.5	40	68.8	100	112

Using warlike terms	Yes	14	2.5	70	25	8.3	28
	No	86	97.5	30	75	91.7	122
Describing the opponent using negative terms	Yes	0	0	50	0	4.2	11
	No	100	100	50	100	95.8	139

Source: created by the authors

**Note: the final column of total units represents the sum of yes and no responses for each of the variables. Thus, the total number of units for each of the variables is 150.**

One datum that stands out, which is indicated by the dichotomous variables that measure negativity and polarization of the media and the candidates, is the prevalence of irresponsible attitudes with regard to María Marín and José Ángel Antelo. In the case of María Marín, it may be due to the cancellation of the only electoral debate among candidates for the Presidency of the Region of Murcia, for refusing to share her time with the candidate of *Más Región Equo*. Regarding José Ángel Antelo, it could be the result of his diverse and conflicting speeches and proposals, which altered the course of the campaign.

At the same time, the candidates from *Unidas Podemos* and *VOX* are the ones who appeal more to juxtaposed stances, competitive terms, and warfare language. Thus, the data suggest that the media coverage of the candidates located at the extremes of the political spectrum in the Murcia Region show more distancing and, as a result, more negativity and discursive polarization compared to the rest of the media. Nevertheless, this investigation is a descriptive media study, and to bring this idea to a conclusion, it would be necessary to carry out quantitative research in order to confirm the assertion.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

In reviewing the research question and objectives of this study, in addition to examining the polarizing messages, the aim is to explain the nature of the media content in the electoral campaign of 28 March in the Autonomous Region of Murcia. The study concludes that the media analysed did not generally display negative content with polarizing features during the campaign. Despite the fact that emotional polarization in the Murcia Region is generally 10 points higher than the national average (Crespo and Mora, 2021), the data seem to indicate that such polarization is not necessarily due to the news coverage or campaign messages transmitted by the media. Furthermore, the results suggest that the tone with which the news is covered on television is almost entirely neutral (91.4%), compared to the press (67.6%). These data appear to indicate that emotional polarization predates the consumption of media content by citizens who obtain political information through these media. Consequently, the negative tone is higher in the press at 27%, while television barely reaches 7.8%. The main contribution of this research is the verification that media content is neither negative nor polarizing.

This conclusion is significant, as it highlights the fact that digital media covering the Murcia Region safeguard their principles of objectivity in the construction of frames that depict real world events (Sádaba, 2008), contrary to other regional studies, which have analysed newspaper coverage on digital platforms and, in one specific case, the content was mostly negative (Córdoba

Cabús *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the present research clearly shows the importance of considering the unique aspects of each context, due to the fact that the media agenda is one of the most important factors to consider, together with the preferences of the public, which in turn are influenced by the wide diversity of existing media and the respective content that they transmit to the public. Cases in which negative content has been observed is related to the candidates at the ideological extremes of the Region, who belong to *VOX* and *Unidas Podemos*. Only in these two cases have negative terms been observed, which show a certain amount of confrontation between the leaders of both parties. As a result, a new communicative strategy of these parties has been revealed, which might be an attempt to highlight ideological differences in a more aggressive way in order to mobilise their voter base and clearly differentiate themselves from their political opponents.

In a study similar to the one at hand, Berganza Conde *et al.* (2016) concluded that media coverage in Spain regarding political news is not completely negative. Instead, such content generally uses a neutral frame, and its average level of negativity is considerably lower than other European countries such as Portugal and Austria. Furthermore, the presence of negativity is also related to topics that are more prevalent in the study herein, or in other words, to issues related to electoral campaigns, such as events, ceremonies, political party activities, etc. As pointed out by Domínguez García *et al.* (2023), after analysing the US campaign and the strategies used by each of the candidates, they conclude that Biden's strategic frames in which the main content focused on building a narrative based on political priorities such as health, education, and public policy management, have a more transversal nature. This study reaches a similar conclusion. In other words, the data suggest that more cross-cutting topics tend to result in less polarizing messages, as they address issues that are relevant and applicable to a broad spectrum of the population, which reduces the inclination to generate division. Added to this idea is the fact that the vast majority of the issues are regional in nature, with hardly any reference to matters of a national scope, yet regional elections are generally dominated by content that refers to national concerns (Zugasti Azagra and García Ortega, 2018; Rivas de Roca, 2021).

Although this research offers a specific case study at the regional level, the results can be extrapolated to the national media for the purpose of confirming whether their content is negative and polarizing during election campaigns. However, the nature of the present analysis limits the conclusions to a media discourse based on a specific selection of media, which does not allow the results to be generally applied. For future research, in addition to increasing the size of the sample, another recommendation is to select media that are more diverse, and to compare the mainstream media in different contexts in order to confirm whether the same dynamics are replicated. Finally, in order to study the impact of a negative and polarizing narrative on public opinion, subsequent studies are recommended that focus on the construction of polarizing opinion as a consequence of media coverage.

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## 6. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and Surname
Conception and design of the work	Inmaculada Melero López, María Isabel López Palazón and María Quiles Bailén
Methodology	Inmaculada Melero López, María Isabel López Palazón and María Quiles Bailén
Data collection and analysis	Inmaculada Melero López, María Isabel López Palazón and María Quiles Bailén
Discussion and conclusions	Inmaculada Melero López, María Isabel López Palazón and María Quiles Bailén
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Inmaculada Melero López, María Isabel López Palazón and María Quiles Bailén

## 7. Conflict of interest

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

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