

Electoral trends and strategies on Instagram: evolution and analysis of political communication in the 2023 Community of Madrid elections

Tendencias y estrategias electoralistas en Instagram: evolución y análisis de la comunicación política en las elecciones de la Comunidad de Madrid 2023



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Abstract:

This research examines the strategic use of Instagram as a means of electoral dissemination among the candidates for the presidency of the Community of Madrid in 2023, taking the 2021 electoral call as a reference point. For this study, the official profiles of Isabel Díaz Ayuso (People's Party), Mónica García (Más Madrid), Juan Lobato (Socialist Party), Rocío Monasterio (Vox) and Alejandra Jacinto (Unidas Podemos) have been considered. The analysis relates the candidates' posts on the topics addressed in the electoral programs, providing a perspective on the emerging dynamics and communication trends

Resumen:

Esta investigación examina el empleo estratégico de Instagram como medio de comunicación electoral entre los candidatos a la presidencia de la Comunidad de Madrid en 2023, tomando como referencia la convocatoria de 2021. Para este estudio, se han considerado los perfiles oficiales de Isabel Díaz Ayuso (Partido Popular), Mónica García (Más Madrid), Juan Lobato (Partido Socialista), Rocío Monasterio (Vox) y Alejandra Jacinto (Unidas Podemos). El análisis relaciona las publicaciones de los aspirantes con los temas abordados en los programas electorales, proporcionando una perspectiva de las dinámicas emergentes y tendencias

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on the platform. The methodology is based on a qualitative approach supported by content analysis, with a sample of 862 posts from the candidates' public accounts during the 2021 and 2023 pre-campaign and electoral campaign. The representation of the leader in the political context and the balance between programmatic and campaign argumentation stand out as significant findings. The adaptability of the strategies to each candidate and their audience is highlighted, although this variability indicates a lack of evolution since the previous call. The research emphasizes the importance of understanding communicative effectiveness in the digital environment and suggests improvements in Instagram optimization for future election campaigns.

Keywords:

Instagram; social networks; elections; political communication; electoral strategy.

comunicativas en la plataforma. La metodología se fundamenta en un enfoque cualitativo respaldado por el análisis de contenido, con una muestra de 862 publicaciones de las cuentas públicas de los candidatos durante la precampaña y campaña de 2021 y 2023. La representación del líder en el contexto político y el equilibrio entre la argumentación programática y de campaña son hallazgos significativos. Se subraya la adaptabilidad de las estrategias a cada candidato y su audiencia, aunque esta variabilidad indica una falta de evolución desde la convocatoria anterior. La investigación enfatiza la importancia de comprender la efectividad comunicativa en el entorno digital y sugiere mejoras en la optimización de Instagram para futuras campañas.

Palabras clave:

Instagram; redes sociales; elecciones; comunicación política; estrategia electoral.

1. Introduction

Social media has transformed political dynamics in the digital age (Norris, 2000). Its consolidation as a communication and mobilization tool is closely linked to its strategic action in the generation of content and user interaction (Chaves-Montero, Gadea-Aiello y Aguadez-Gómez, 2017). Its influence on the media agenda and on the construction of the candidate's identity (McCombs, 2005) redefines its propagandistic use (Orantes Rivera, 2021), making it an essential facilitator during election campaigns. This symbiosis shapes voter practices and modifies the traditional configuration of public opinion (Alonso González, 2016) in the face of emerging challenges in a field marked by its transformational impact (Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

Although the use of social media responds to a natural evolution as a means of communication (Abejón-Mendoza, Sastre Asensio and Linares-Rodríguez, 2012), its participatory and mobilizing nature as a source of information (Orihuela, 2011) motivates a proactive commitment by leaders in their approach to users (Conde del Río, Pullaguari-Zaruma and Prada-Espinel, 2019).

In this sense, discourse is integrated into the mediatization and *spectacularization* of political debate (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Casero-Ripollés, Ortells-Badenes and Rosique Cedillo, 2014), becoming the central core of planned strategies. Values such as ease in message dissemination, immediate accessibility and feedback (Maarek, 2014) encourage the presence of a voter increasingly familiar with the communicative interaction of platforms (Ayala, 2014).

This evolution is clearly evident since, in 2023, 85% of users, in an age range between 16 and 65, actively participate on social media (IAB España, 2023). This phenomenon, marked by generalized exponential growth, reveals that 76% of the sample logs on every day. Specifically, Instagram stands out as the network that has experienced the highest growth in recent years (The Social Media Family, 2023), and has also strengthened its position as an influential medium in the field of political marketing (Jordán-Vaca, Ballesteros-López, Guerrero-Velástegui and Zúñiga-Rodríguez, 2019). In addition, its audiovisual capacity for the creation, editing and dissemination of its posts has significantly transformed the use of social networks (Tirao-García and Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). Apart from the correlation with X or Facebook, recognized as media with a strong

relationship between leaders and voters (Campos-Domínguez, 2017), Instagram facilitates a dynamic exchange of audiovisual resources whose narrative emerges as an identity tool (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017). This language, forged in a process of mediatization where the fusion of visual and informative elements determines the relationship with the user (Slimovich, 2019), redefines connectivity and bidirectional engagement between the parties involved (Túñez López and Sixto García, 2011), which proves to be very useful in the construction of political leadership, the *celebrification* of the candidate and the application of propaganda strategies (Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Oliva, Pérez-Latorre and Besalú, 2015). In this way, Instagram has become an object of research that has been explored in numerous analyses.

In line with other studies on the various dimensions of the social network, scientific research focused on election campaigns has gained special importance in the last decade. The need to understand the impact of Instagram on political perception enables detailed analysis of its narrative and the consequent propagandistic representation of candidates (Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017; Marcos-García and Alonso-Muñoz, 2017). These studies highlight the importance of obtaining popular support through strategies that humanize the leader by integrating the political framework with the private one.

In addition, these lines of research, based on previous studies on other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Izquierdo Label, 2012; Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán, 2013; Ruiz-del-Olmo and Bustos-Díaz, 2016; López-Rabadán, López-Meri and Doménech-Fabregat, 2016) coincide with the growing demand and expansion of Instagram (Gil-Torres, Tapia-Cuesta and San-José-de-la-Rosa, 2021). This trend, recognized by political representatives despite the initial disinterest (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017; Pineda, Barragán-Romero and Bellido-Pérez, 2020), now places the emerging candidates as protagonists in the analysis of the construction of their leaderships. The promotion of private aspects and their link to the party's ideology are the central focus of their posts (Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro, 2018; Sampietro and Sánchez-Castillo, 2020; Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey, 2020).

In parallel, other studies exploring strategies within the regional or autonomous context are encouraged. This approach is not only limited to election periods, but also extends to other events, such as the Catalan independence movement (López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat, 2018; Cartes Barroso, 2018), which strengthens the intrinsic connection between Instagram and political news. This link, which consolidates the normalization of political use of the social network (López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat, 2019), transcends the need to explore the definition of a communicative style among candidates by incorporating the search for potential audiences as an essential component of research. This is the case in the elections for the Regional Government of Andalusia in 2018, when Vox focused all its strategies on the mobilization of younger voters (Carrasco-Polaino, Sánchez de la-Nieta-Hernández and Treles-Villanueva, 2020). This pragmatic approach is equally evident in Galicia, where the BNG, taking control of the digital environment characteristic of new politics, implements strategies based on efficiency and practicality to approach new voter profiles (Rivas-de-Roca, 2021). In this reality, candidates for the presidency of Castilla-León show a deliberate adaptation in the typology of their posts, expressing greater interest in the political agenda to the detriment of the private sphere (Moreno-Cabanillas and Castilero-Ostio, 2023). These dynamics, configured by the use of visual resources and participation tools, also have a significant impact on the way they are received. This is demonstrated in the Valencian Community, where opposition supporters express greater support for content that presents more critical

positions compared to government supporters who prefer content that highlights the success of its management (García, Viounnikoff-Benet y Casero Ripollés, 2020).

Academic research has recently focused on the consolidation of political movements that exhibit traits of contemporary populism. The incursion of the far-right Vox party and the analysis of its impact on public perception through mobilization, political attack and delegitimization (Castro Martínez and Díaz Morilla, 2021; López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat, 2021; Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar, 2021; Bernárdez-Robal, Requeijo Rey and Franco, 2022) identify specific features in the use of Instagram. The interaction implemented by the dynamism of the image (Tirado-García and Doménech-Fabregat, 2021), the avoidance of the dissemination of programmatic proposals in favour of propaganda (Lava Santos, 2023) and a persuasive discourse that urges immediate action against the government through insult and emotionality (Prestigiacomo, 2023) are part of their main strategies. Along these lines, studies focusing on other leadership styles delve deeper into the narrative of humanization. They highlight the engagement and protection of admirers (Caro-Castaño, Marín-Dueñas and García-Osorio, 2024) and the deliberate use of spontaneity in favour of naturalness and closeness (Plazas-Olmedo and López-Rabadán, 2023) as the current trend on social networks.

Within this framework, the study of the elections for the presidency of the Community of Madrid, and the relationship between the last two elections, constitute the beginning and focus of analysis of this research and, specifically, the posts made by the candidates on the social network Instagram. Therefore, the official profiles included for this analysis are as follows: Isabel Díaz Ayuso (People's Party), Mónica García (Más Madrid), Juan Lobato (Socialist Party), Rocío Monasterio (Vox) and Alejandra Jacinto (Unidas Podemos). The consideration of the Madrid elections as a central scenario is justified by several distinguishing variables: the national political confrontation, the fragmentation of leftist party brands, and the identity-driven growth of the far right. The strong opposition of all candidates to the acting president, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, along with her confrontations with both other parties and Pedro Sánchez, the Prime Minister, allows us to understand these elections as a prelude to the general elections scheduled for the same year, and as part of the strategies of leaders aspiring to the Moncloa. Furthermore, the diversification of leftist forces, striving for a *sorpasso* to lead the bloc, is in constant debate with the far right, which aims to play a decisive role in the formation of government, thereby establishing the ideological diversity of the campaign. In this regard, Instagram is viewed as a significant medium for influencing the construction and dissemination of political messages and perceptions.

Consequently, to understand the various ways Instagram is utilized, several key elements are examined. These include the format of the posts, the staging context and the role played by the candidate. In addition, the nature of the posts is assessed. In this context, special attention is paid to the various electoral topics associated with the programme proposals, regarded as an additional contribution to the study of this platform. The conclusions seek to expand previous research in this field.

1.1. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective of this study is to examine the posts of candidates for the presidency of the Community of Madrid in 2023 on the Instagram social network. At the same time, the aim is to conduct a comparative analysis, within the framework of the previous autonomous community election, as a continuation of the previous research carried out in 2021. In this way, the aim is not only to understand the political communication actions surrounding the party's programme lines but also to discern the

variations between these two electoral periods as part of the *celebrification* or media image of the leader within the context of their political strategy.

In addition, the following complementary objectives are proposed:

- a) To examine the use of the digital platform in the election phases through the official profiles managed by the candidates in a specific way.
- b) To determine the structural elements of the posts with the aim of identifying the representation of the Madrid policy.
- c) To learn about the propagandistic arguments present in the posts, as well as their development and evolution within the context of the political strategy between elections.
- d) To analyse the themes addressed in the electoral programmes and their correlation with the discourse shaping the candidate's posts.

As a general hypothesis, it is proposed that candidates enhance Instagram's capacity as an effective communication channel for disseminating their political action plans, transcending its mere function of promoting the leader's personal image. Consequently, this study is based on the premise that the platform strategically consolidates itself as a relevant medium within the context of electoral processes across different elections.

- a) The research also proposes the following complementary hypotheses:
- b) The inclusion of the programmatic topics of the posts is a common feature across all political parties and is understood as part of the campaign strategy.
- c) The thematic argumentative presentation of the posts requires a close connection with the candidate's persona.
- d) Political leaders prefer to share more professional images rather than personal ones to provide a more accurate context for their political action and management plans.

2. Methodology

The study proposes a methodology grounded in content analysis supported by a qualitative approach. Therefore, references are maintained to previous research by Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva (2017) and Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño (2017), alongside the study of more recent works such as Pineda, Barragán-Romero and Bellido-Pérez (2020), Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey (2020), and López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat (2021).

The dataset consists of a total of 862 Instagram feed posts. It includes 485 recent posts, as well as 377 from the 2021 election. This sample contains images and videos, accompanied by their respective textual explanations. This study excludes *stories* due to their ephemeral nature and more informal character, thereby focusing the research on programmatic communication strategies within a more structured and enduring context. In addition, their omission allows the sample to be consistent. This facilitates comparison between posts and allows for a more accurate assessment in an interaction space that remains visible and accessible to users over time.

Following a methodology similar to that used in the previous elections, the political leaders analysed belong to groups with parliamentary representation in the previous legislature. Therefore, this new study does not contemplate the spokesperson for Ciudadanos, a party without seats in the Assembly. Similarly, the analysis order is established according to the number of votes obtained. Two new candidates are also included following the replacement of Ángel Gabilondo (Socialist Party) and Pablo Iglesias (Unidas Podemos). The political leaders analysed are as follows: Isabel Díaz Ayuso (@isabeldiazayuso) of the People's Party, Mónica García (@monicagarciarag_) of Más Madrid, Juan Lobato (@juanlobato_es) of the Socialist Party, Rocío Monasterio (@rociomonateriovox) of Vox and Alejandra Jacinto (@alejandrajacintouranga) of Unidas Podemos.

With the aim of linking the use of Instagram to the dissemination of the parties' ideological proposals, the decision was made to select the time frame that includes the publication of electoral programmes, the pre-campaign, and the electoral campaign. This period, which runs from 10 April to 27 May 2023, also coincides with the official announcement of candidates and their progressive posts and interactions on Instagram. This election was held two years after the early election call in 2021, in accordance with Madrid's legislation.

Moreover, following their publication on each party's website, the various electoral programmes are examined. This analysis provides a comprehensive view of the different electoral approaches from a partisan perspective. This statement of intent is seen as the foundational argument that guides political action and, consequently, the type of participation each leader engages in on the social network. Through this evaluation, a more detailed understanding is gained of the total number of proposals and their relation to specific thematic areas, grouped into different categories: *Social Policy, Healthcare, Culture, Education, Economy, Housing, Justice, Environment, Administration, Transport and Democracy*. These themes have been defined using an inductive approach based on content analysis, inspired by the generic classification of administrative activity at the State and Autonomous Community of Madrid levels, encompassing the relevant ministries and departments. This ensures a systematic and comprehensible structure of the topics addressed. This organisation allows for synthesizing the observed variability between the different programmes, both in terms of scope and structure, in order to simplify the thematic linkage of the posts.

In addition to contextualizing the thematic proposals and the number of posts, this research presents the analysis of other essential aspects that, inherently, respond to the perception of the candidate's political representation on Instagram (Lalancette and Raynaud, 2019). These characteristics are evaluated using a series of variables based on the categorization proposed by Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva (2017) and Vico and Requeijo Rey (2020). The coding template, designed in accordance with the guidelines established for the 2021 electoral study, encompasses multiple aspects related to the political identity of the posts. These variables are related to the *content typology*, distinguishing between photographs and audiovisual material, as well as their formal characteristics, expressed either as a sequential carousel or a standard non-sequential format. In addition, other elements are considered such as the context or *scenario of the post* (political, public or private), the *prominence of the candidate* (individual, with leaders, etc.) and the nature of the *propagandistic messaging*. This variable is subdivided into the party's programmatic orientation and its relationship with the thematic categories of the electoral programme; mentions of the political rival; and the personalistic aspect, which focuses on the candidate's significance beyond their image as a leader. Additionally, in this election, a new category has been introduced related to the generic promotion of the campaign, which encompasses the overall dissemination of the candidate and/or party in relation to the identity and brand image of the region. This category does not focus on specific policies or programmatic thematic areas, but aims to foster a greater understanding

and appreciation of both the Community and its population. The *Other* category related to posts that do not conform to a specific definition within the aforementioned categories is also included. The detailed description of these variables is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the study variables

ANALYSIS OF THE MATERIAL POSTED	
Variables	Categories
Type of content/post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photo: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Carousel (sequence of images). ○ Standard (non-sequential image).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiovisual material: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Carousel (video sequence). ○ Standard (non-sequential video). ○ Media (appearance in the media).
Scenario and context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political (candidate as a politician: participation in party events, political speeches, press conferences). • Public (candidate as celebrity: participation in public places, interaction with citizens). • Private (candidate as person: in a family or private setting).
Prominence of the candidate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusive/alone. • Candidate with leaders. • Candidate with citizens. • Candidate with leaders and citizens. • Candidate with sympathizers.
Propagandistic messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics of the electoral programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Social Policy</i> ○ <i>Healthcare</i> ○ <i>Culture</i> ○ <i>Education</i> ○ <i>Economy</i> ○ <i>Housing</i> ○ <i>Justice</i> ○ <i>Environment</i> ○ <i>Administration</i> ○ <i>Transport</i> ○ <i>Democracy</i> • Political rival (mention or allusion to the rival). • Personality (character). • Promotion of image/campaign. • Other.

Source: author's own creation

In the context of this research, the overall number of followers of each candidate at the end of the campaign has also been considered: Isabel Díaz Ayuso (570,126), Mónica García (195,132), Rocío Monasterio (72,445), Juan Lobato (11,104) and Alejandra Jacinto (9,207), along with user interactions, specifically quantified through *likes*. These data aim to identify the presumed interest that users express towards a specific propagandistic thematic line and to determine whether this interest can influence the effectiveness of the communication strategy employed by the candidates in their posts.

3. Findings

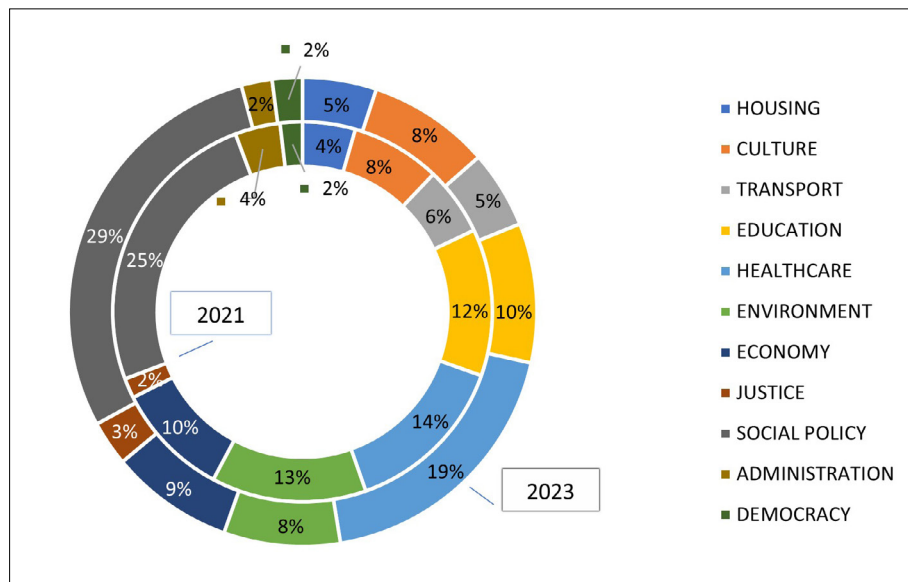
3.1. Thematic structuring of electoral programmes

In line with the previous election, all political parties have structured their electoral programmes according to a careful thematic organisation. These programmes are characterized by their broad argumentative scope, as well as their carefully curated and protected party image. Once again, it is noted that the only exception to this norm is the Vox party, which presents a synthesis of ten generic measures. However, despite their conciseness, these measures align with the themes addressed by the other groups, which also include summarized versions of their programmes that provide a comprehensive overview. Nevertheless, this does not exempt them from a detailed analysis of their proposals and institutional identity.

The thematic axes are presented in Chart 1, which illustrates the percentages of each argumentative line in relation to the total set of proposals put forward. This chart shows 12 key axes that have been meticulously organized and categorized following the appropriate comparative analysis. In this electoral call, a more detailed subdivision of these axes is observed, incorporating new appendices such as *International Solidarity*, *Democratic Memory*, *Loneliness* and *Work-life Balance*, among others. This distinction is particularly noticeable in leftist parties and those that have presented a greater number of electoral promises. Within this context, the terminology and subdivisions used have once again been consolidated to maintain thematic coherence.

For example, the area of *Social Policy* encompasses a set of measures based on shared conceptual foundations, such as Equality, Immigration and Interculturality, Coexistence, Family, Feminism, LGTBI, Childhood, Youth, Ageing and Disability. *Housing* covers issues related to Urban Planning, Land Planning, Urban Agenda and Rural Environment. Similarly, the *Economy* area refers to aspects related to Employment and Consumer Affairs, and *Culture* relates to Tourism and Sports. In the context of the *Environment*, topics related to Biodiversity, Agriculture, Sustainability and Ecological and Energy Transition, as well as Climate Emergency, are grouped together. Additionally, the category of *Democracy* has been assigned in response to the related interest in Democratic Memory and National Sovereignty.

Chart 1. Topics discussed in the different electoral programmes in 2021 and 2023



Source: author's own creation based on data from the political parties

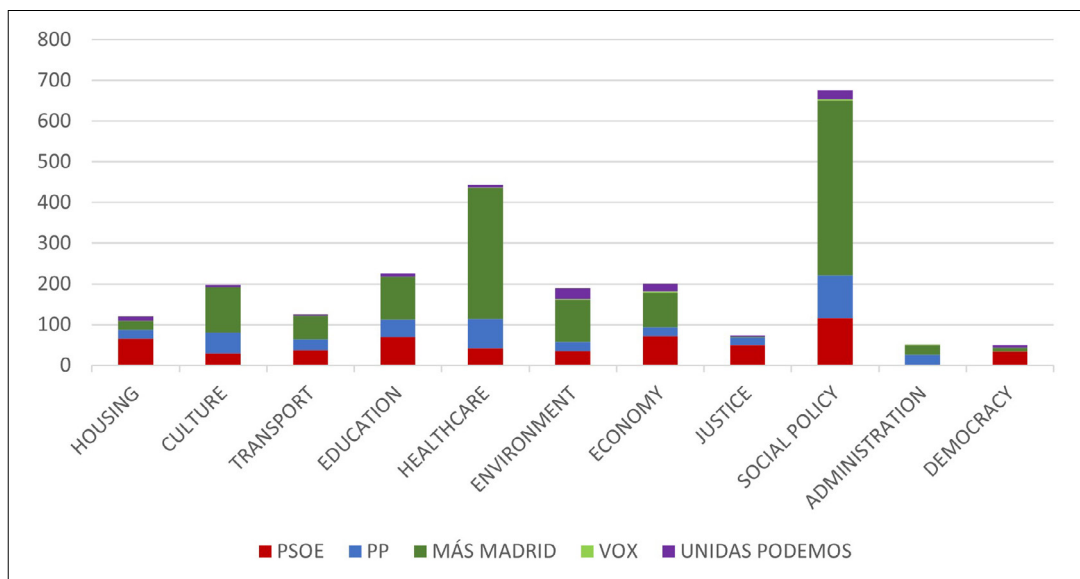
The data once again reveal that *Social Policy* (29%) and *Healthcare* (19%) are the two thematic axes that receive the most attention in the 2023 electoral programmes, similar to the trends observed in the previous elections. In third place, *Education* (10%) holds a prominent position, just as the *Environment* (13%) did in 2021. On the other hand, *Administration* (2%) and *Democracy* (2%) occupy the last positions, receiving less focus from the parties. The other topics are grouped into a range of 8 to 3%. Moreover, the prominence of social measures, linked to the diversity of topics and their collective nature, continues to shape the central strategy for both electoral calls. Similarly, *Healthcare*, in second place, also has a community-oriented aspect that complements the social focus of the overall political ideals.

In terms of the number of specific proposals per electoral programme, the Más Madrid group leads the list, followed by the Socialist Party, thereby displacing Unidas Podemos, which held this position in the 2021 elections, to third place. Subsequently, the People's Party and Vox hold their positions. According to the data, all parties focus their interest on *Social Policy*, except United Podemos, with a preference for the *Environment*. This was not the case in 2021 when the People's Party and Vox prioritized *Education and Housing* rather than *Social Policy*, which was preferred by the other parties.

Regarding the second thematic axis of 2023, Más Madrid and the People's Party align on *Healthcare*, although it is noteworthy that the party led by Mónica García presents nearly five times the number of proposals compared to those of Isabel Díaz Ayuso. Meanwhile, the Socialist Party has chosen to prioritize the *Economy* this time, as has Vox. For Unidas Podemos, their second focus is on measures related to *Social Policy*.

Democracy, which was a key focus for Unidas Podemos in 2021 and held a prominent place in both the electoral programmes and the campaign, has been largely overlooked by the other parties. In 2023, it remains of little interest to the People’s Party and Vox, although the Socialist Party has included a greater number of proposals compared to the previous electoral call. Nevertheless, *Democracy*, along with *Administration* and *Justice*, are the three axes that receive the least attention overall, with *Madrid* being mentioned without any specific details. Additionally, the absence of initiatives in *Mobility*, *Culture*, and *Education* from Vox is also noted.

Chart 2. Thematic axes of the electoral programs by party in 2023



Source: author’s own creation based on data from the political parties

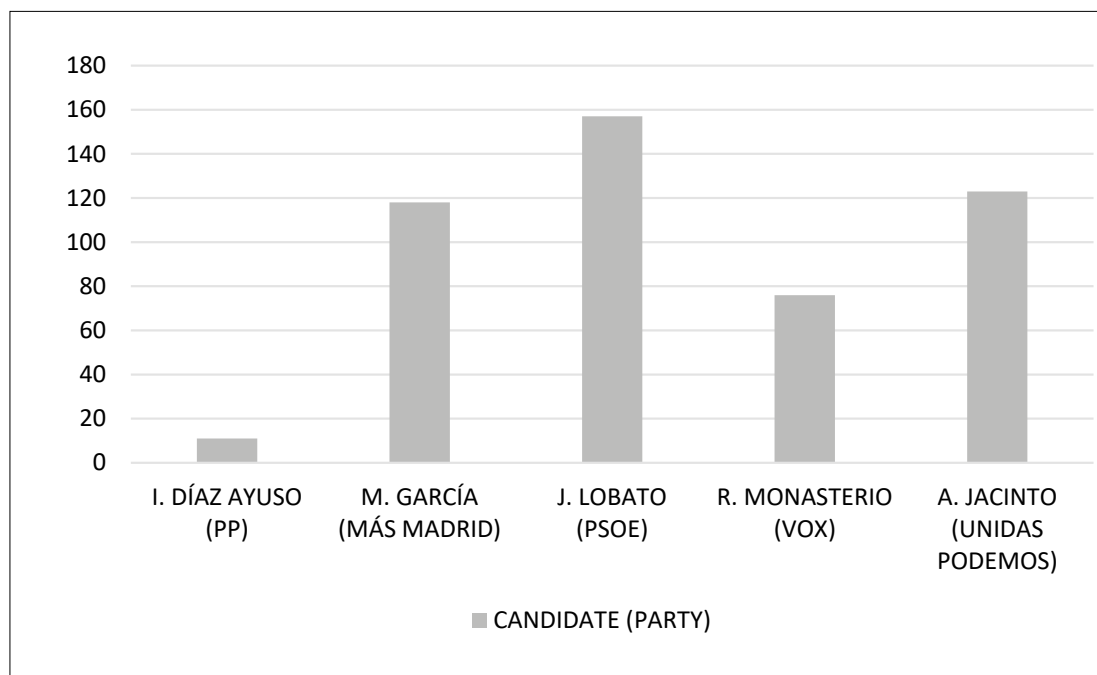
In terms of ideological orientation, the data obtained reveal a significant change compared to the previous elections. While in 2021 there was a clear distinction between the thematic axes of the left- and right-wing parties, in 2023 there is a notable alignment between Más Madrid and the People’s Party, which are seen as representatives of the two main ideological trends in the Madrid Assembly, both enjoying substantial public support. Consequently, *Social Policy*, *Healthcare*, and *Culture* are their three priority areas, regardless of the total number of proposals presented. The other topics show a similar classification between both parties.

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3.2. Exposure and practice on Instagram

The third chart shows that the candidate who uses the social network most is Juan Lobato, the Socialist Party representative. He is followed in this trend by Unidas Podemos, with Alejandra Jacinto. These figures are similar to the 2021 election, when Ángel Gabilondo and Pablo Iglesias were aspiring to the presidency (respectively). Overall, the candidates' activity in 2023 is consistent, although a substantial increase is noticeable during the pre-campaign period.

Chart 3. Candidate activity on Instagram in 2023



Source: author's own creation based on data from Instagram

In terms of ideological affiliation, left-wing parties have increased their activity compared to the previous electoral call. Meanwhile, right-wing parties either maintain or even reduce their engagement, as is the case with Díaz Ayuso from the People's Party, who made few posts throughout the campaign.

Figure 1. Instagram post on the profile of Díaz Ayuso (PP)



Source: Instagram (@isabeldiazayuso / People's Party)

In the comprehensive analysis of all candidates, the predominant type of content is *standard video*, which accounts for 39% of the total. This format, which ranked third in 2021, has seen a significant increase. Following closely in importance is the sequence of *carousel photos*, accounting for 36%, and *standard non-sequential photos*, which make up 19%. Candidate videos in the *media* constitute 6% of the total, while *carousel videos* yield no results.

In contrast to the previous electoral call, there is a noticeable trend towards equalizing the use of photography, which accounts for 55%, and video, which comprises 45% of the total content. This shift reflects an increasing interest among candidates in creating and disseminating audiovisual content. Mónica García (MM) and Juan Lobato (PSOE) are the candidates with the highest number of video posts.

Figure 2. Photo by Mónica García (MM) on Instagram



Source: Instagram (@monicagarciag_ / Más Madrid)

Regarding the variable linked to the performance space, a noticeable difference is observed between the *political sphere* (53%) and the *public space* (40%), contrasting with the nearly equal data recorded for these settings in 2021. With the exception of Monasterio (Vox), who prefers the *public space*, the other candidates prioritize the *political sphere*. Once again, it is the representative of the Socialist Party who makes the majority of this type of posts. This preference reflects a greater inclination towards a specific setting, in contrast to the balance between categories seen in the previous electoral call. Additionally, in this instance, the *private space* (7%) is mainly represented by Lobato (PSOE).

Figure 3. Screen capture of a photograph posted by the Socialist candidate

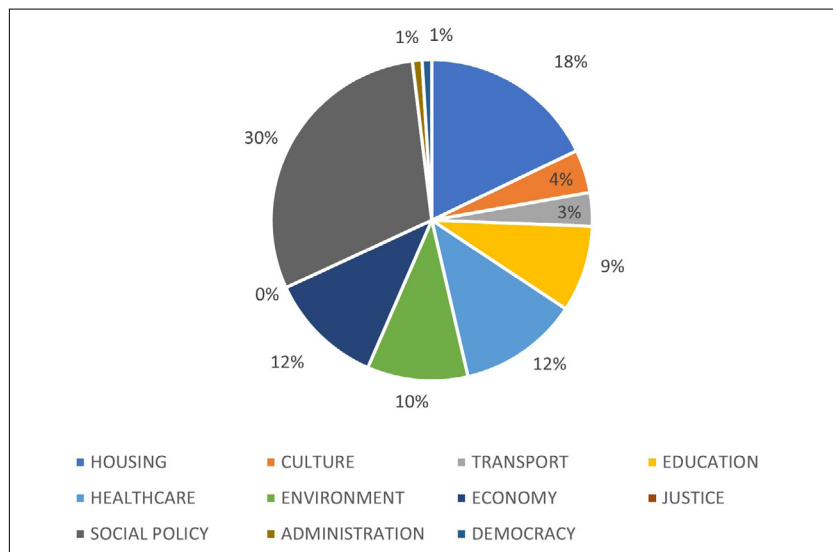


Source: Instagram (@juanlobato_es / Socialist Party)

In terms of candidate prominence, it is notable that this time there are more balanced results compared to 2021, at least in the overall tally. The *candidate alongside leaders and citizens* leads with 29%, closely followed by the *candidate with leaders*, which accounts for 28%. The candidate's *exclusive presence alone* represents an additional 28%, while posts featuring the *candidate with citizens* make up 15% of the total. However, the specific data by candidate show a more differentiated result. While Díaz Ayuso (PP) coincides with Lobato (PSOE) in presenting herself alone, García (MM) and Jacinto (UP) prefer to appear alongside leaders. Monasterio (Vox), on the other hand, prefers posts in the company of citizens.

3.3. Messaging and Thematic Axes on Instagram

Chart 4. Programmatic theme of the posts of the different candidates



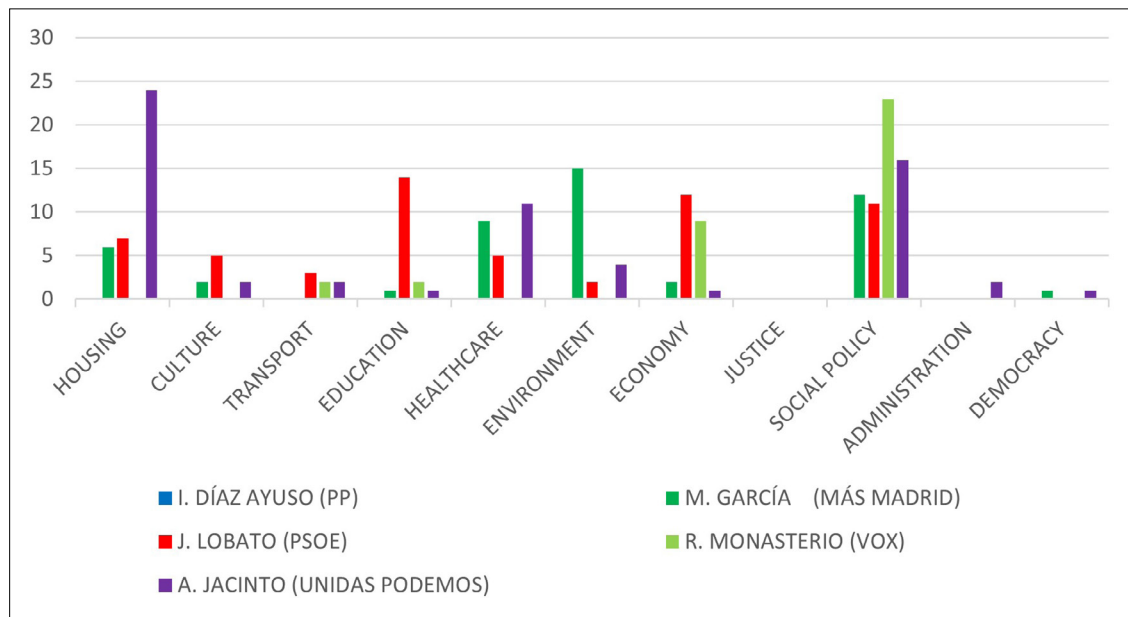
Source: author's own creation based on data from Instagram

Among the 479 posts produced by the candidates, which represents an increase of more than one hundred compared to the previous electoral period, 97% feature propaganda content. There is a clear preference for messaging related to *party programmes*, which account for 43%, closely followed by those associated with *campaign image* at 40%. In contrast, *personal messaging* and those related to *political rivals* each represent 7%, which is half the interest generated in 2021. The category *Others* comprises 3% of the posts.

In terms of the thematic relationship between electoral programme categories and party programme messaging, *Social Policy* (30%) and *Housing* (18%) are the two main axes preferred by the candidates, alongside *Economy* and *Healthcare* (12%). With less interest are *Administration* (1%), *Democracy* (1%), and *Justice* (0%). These figures mark a notable difference compared to the previous elections, particularly in the case of *Democracy*, which was the most preferred category with 35% of posts.

The graph illustrates that *Social Policy* (30%), in line with the data from the electoral programmes, is the dominant theme across all interactions, followed by *Housing* (18%). In terms of volume, *Economy* and *Healthcare* follow, each with 12%, then *Environment* at 10%, and *Education* at 9%. These figures indicate a relatively balanced level of interest, although there is a general decline in the number of posts in favour of a concentration of posts on a specific thematic axis, in this case, *Social Policy*. Following this, with lower percentages ranging from 4% to 1%, are *Culture*, *Mobility*, *Administration*, and *Democracy*. The posts do not directly address policies related to *Justice*.

Chart 5. Distribution of thematic axes posted by candidate in 2023



Source: author's own creation based on data from Instagram

Each candidate demonstrates a particular preference for specific themes, contributing to a certain diversity within the overall landscape. For instance, *Environment* is the most important axis for García (MM), *Education* holds that position for Lobato (PSOE), *Social Policy* is of greater interest to Monasterio (Vox), and *Housing* stands out for Jacinto (UP). Diaz Ayuso (PP) deviates from this trend, as she has not posted anything related to programme-based political arguments.

The second most popular topic remains unchanged from 2021, largely due to the overlap among candidates. *Social Policy* is favoured by García (MM) and Jacinto (UP), while *Economy* is highlighted by Lobato (PSOE) and Monasterio (Vox).

Figure 4. Instagram post on the profile of Monasterio (VOX)



Source: Instagram (@rociomonasteriovox / Vox)

The information regarding the unmentioned topics varies among the candidates. Notably, Díaz Ayuso (PP) omits all topics, continuing the trend observed in the previous elections. Monasterio (Vox) follows closely behind, lacking content on up to seven topics. In contrast, the other candidates show a more balanced distribution, particularly García (MM) and Lobato (PSOE). The candidate for Más Madrid omits the areas of *Mobility*, *Justice* and *Administration*, while the Socialist Party candidate excludes *Justice*, *Administration* and *Democracy*. Jacinto (UP) also omits *Justice*, the only theme for which she lacks content.

From an ideological standpoint, there is no clear difference between the left- and right-wing parties, as was evident in 2021, despite the variability in their preferences. This is reflected in the alignment of their second and third choices, particularly their shared preference for *Social Policy*. The main contrast lies in Díaz Ayuso's (PP) indifference compared to the other candidates.

In terms of propaganda focused on references to political opponents, Más Madrid and the Socialist Party stand out, even matching the number of posts dedicated to key themes like *Social Policy* and the *Economy*. Vox and Unidas Podemos show lower figures, though they publish more posts compared to other areas. The People's Party, as in the previous election, avoids any such posts.

Regarding personalistic messaging, Lobato (Socialist Party) leads with the highest number of posts, followed by Díaz Ayuso (People's Party) and Monasterio (Vox). The other candidates show less interest in posts concerning aspects beyond political activity.

Finally, the type of messaging focused on promoting general aspects related to the cultural and social engagement of the candidate during the campaign has garnered considerable interest across all parties. The Socialist Party leads in the number of posts, followed by Más Madrid, Unidas Podemos, Vox and the People's Party, in that order. Individual contributions from Juan Lobato (Socialist Party) and Mónica García (Más Madrid) even surpass those in other categories. Meanwhile, Díaz Ayuso (People's Party) shows a significantly lower volume of posts compared to her competitors, ranking second overall in terms of personalistic propaganda. Rocío Monasterio (Vox) and Alejandra Jacinto (UP) also engage in campaign messaging, although their focus is more on programmatic themes.

When looking at posts that receive the most *likes* from users, candidates from right-wing parties tend to generate more interaction compared to those from left-wing parties. A standout example is Díaz Ayuso (People's Party), whose campaign poster post garnered 84,129 *likes*. It is important to note that this photograph does not explicitly reference any specific ideological aspects of her electoral programme but leans more towards a personalistic approach. Following this, Monasterio (Vox) garnered 20,070 interactions with a post featuring a segment from the televised electoral debate between candidates. This post was not specifically created for Instagram, as it originated from Telemadrid, the regional television channel. The video shows the candidate tearing up a piece of paper containing some information about unaccompanied foreign minors (Menas), a topic related to social policy.

Regarding the posts with the most *likes* from left-wing candidates, García (Más Madrid) achieves a total of 15,839 with a video produced by her own campaign team. In this video, she discusses healthcare during a rally and makes an emotional reference to her father. Although there is a personalistic tone in this case, most of the content is presented from a political perspective.

Figure 5. Instagram post on the profile of Alejandra Jacinto (Unidas Podemos)



Source: Instagram (@alejandrajacintouranga / Unidas Podemos)

Next, Jacinto (Unidas Podemos) earns 12,185 *likes* for a video in which she gives Díaz Ayuso (PP) a book written by the former Minister of Social Policies about the neglect of elderly care homes during the pandemic. This post, like the one from the Vox candidate, comes from the televised electoral debate and directly references the political opponent as the basis of her messaging. Finally, Lobato (PSOE) has a total of 1,745 likes, the lowest figure compared to the other candidates, with a video excerpt discussing his candidacy from an interview he gave on Onda Cero radio.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study has been to understand the ideological and programmatic positions of the various candidates for the presidency of the Community of Madrid by examining the relationship between the different thematic lines of their electoral campaigns and the posts shared on social media. Throughout the electoral period, with a particular focus on the differences between the 2021 and 2023 elections, the strategic dissemination plan of each candidate has been identified. As a result, the findings provide a comprehensive view of how the candidates manage their programmatic proposals while promoting their leader's image.

In this way, Instagram remains a valuable tool for disseminating political content. As part of communication strategy, the social network is used consistently, as evidenced by the continuous posts related to the candidates' public image and their *celebrification*. However, its usage does not show significant improvement compared to 2021, despite retaining its position

as the leading social network in Spain. Just like in the previous electoral campaign, the quantity and regularity of posts are frequent, but they vary significantly among the different candidates.

The average number of daily posts still shows disparities, as it can sometimes be as low as one or none, even for consecutive days, while at other times it can double. Although it is evident that the number of posts tends to increase during periods of heightened electoral activity, there is also a noticeable decrease in content related to events that could potentially generate a larger volume of posts. In addition, this variability does not seem to depend on the evolution of the campaign or proximity to the voting date. In fact, there is a noticeable increase in posts during the pre-campaign phase. Thus, despite Instagram's strengthening as a communication medium (Tirado-García and Doménech-Fabregat, 2021) and the progressive professionalization of its management (Sánchez Hunt and De Aguilera, 2023), the lack of a consolidated pattern (Moreno-Cabanillas and Castellero-Ostio, 2023) highlights the inequality in its usage. Indeed, there is no substantial change between different electoral calls, which indicates an apparent indifference from political groups as they limit their usage to self-promotion (Miquel-Segarra and Casero-Ripollés, 2016) as the main strategy.

Thus, Instagram deviates from a uniform political strategy, instead allowing for a personalized adaptation of profiles and users without a specific criterion, beyond an increase in the volume of posts or a preference for specific formats. For instance, Díaz Ayuso (People's Party) shows a usage pattern that contrasts significantly with the other candidates, who also exhibit differences among themselves across most of the analysed variables. Even so, the regularity of their posts, which is common across most of the politicians, is understood as a progressive integration of political practice on Instagram. This pattern also contributes to the homogenization of political party identities, blurring the lines between old and new politics (Marcos-García and Alonso-Muñoz, 2017), which suggests a stabilization of the electoral landscape, despite gaps in other political contexts (Ferré-Pavía and Codina, 2022). However, there is a clear distinction between ideological factions. Once again, the left demonstrates a significantly higher volume of activity compared to the right. While it is true that the 2023 electoral campaign features more left-wing candidates, the overall posts indicate a striking quantitative disparity. This ongoing trend contradicts other previous propagandistic representations (Pineda et al., 2020) and reinforces the previously mentioned strategic divergence. A similar pattern is observed with the number of *likes*. However, in this case, the right receives more support than the left.

The results indicate that Juan Lobato (Socialist Party) is the candidate with the highest number of posts. His involvement was more active compared to his predecessor, Ángel Gabilondo (Socialist Party), who was also the most engaged in 2021. Once again, the political strategy focuses on consolidating the candidate's popularity (Gamir-Ríos, Cano-Orón, Fenoll, and Iranzo-Cabrera, 2022) among voters and the potential audience on social media (Gil-Torres et al., 2021). However, the Socialist candidate receives the lowest number of *likes* per post, indicating limited interaction from his followers. In contrast, Díaz Ayuso (People's Party), despite having a lower number of posts, generates more pronounced interaction and, consequently, a greater potential reach due to her substantial follower count. This disparity between candidates results in a significant difference of 82,000 *likes* and 150 posts. Notably, this strategy appears to have remained unchanged over time. In 2011, Tomás Gómez, then representing the Socialist Party, demonstrated greater social media activity compared to Esperanza Aguirre, the leader of the People's Party and President of the Community (Abejón et al., 2012).

This observation highlights the need for a deeper strategic understanding of how to optimize Instagram, fostering a significant debate about communicative effectiveness in the digital political landscape. In this context, Instagram's role—beyond its standardization and the sociopolitical factors that influence an electoral campaign—is closely tied to the candidate's uniqueness, the nature of their message and the specifics of their audience. Ultimately, Díaz Ayuso (People's Party) achieves an absolute majority, while Más Madrid and the Socialist Party maintain their positions, albeit with an increase in the number of seats. Conversely, Vox experiences a considerable decline and Unidas Podemos fails to secure parliamentary representation.

Regarding the format of the posts, there is a growing interest in standard videos, with greater attention given to post-production. Moreover, videos are the preferred format when it comes to the number of *likes*. This suggests a positive correlation between audiovisual content and user engagement, indicating that an increase in video usage could establish a more effective strategy (Názaro, Crozzoli, and Álvarez-Nobell, 2019). However, the predominant preference still lies with photos, consistent with previous trends and the inherently visual nature of the platform.

The representation of the leader and, consequently, the narrative construction of their strategic actions predominantly occurs within a political context, contrasting with 2021, when there was greater variability in the use of public and private settings. This trend directs the posts toward more specific political aspects, such as governance and representation, thereby strengthening the competitive electoral environment. Additionally, the individualization of the candidate (Pineda et al., 2020) gives way to joint appearances with other leaders, particularly among the newer parties. This shift in focus suggests the potential for adopting new strategies in future electoral campaigns. At the same time, traditional posts related to the candidate's honesty, authenticity and approachability (Sampietro and Sánchez-Castillo, 2020; Sánchez Medero, Pastor Albaladejo and Jiménez Meroño, 2022; Quevedo, Portalés-Oliva and Berrocal, 2016), remain prevalent, primarily linked to the public setting, which plays a complementary role during the campaign.

In contrast, the private sphere, once again limited to posts related to family or leisure time, is not prioritized. Most candidates limit the sharing of personal aspects, although their occasional presence acknowledges the importance of emotional connection with voters (García-Beaudoux and Slimovich, 2021), a crucial element in personalistic messaging. Notably, Lobato (PSOE) adopts a strategy that, unlike most candidates, aligns with the approach taken by some candidates in previous elections by more frequently sharing posts related to his fatherhood. Nevertheless, there is a general reconsideration of the private sphere in shaping the public image of candidates. However, in this context, Díaz Ayuso (PP) continues to adopt a discreet profile, in line with her strategy in previous elections: few posts and all of them based on a personal perspective and resembling advertising discourse (Caro-Castaño et al., 2024). In this regard, the strategy employed on Instagram again focuses on shaping the candidate as a brand entity in line with their positioning in other media (Gómez and Patiño, 2019; Vicente-Fernández and Soria Ibáñez, 2023).

In line with the electoral landscape, programmatic messaging takes precedence over other types of content. The dissemination of political material linked to a specific theme is a common practice among candidates. This approach is again not directly related to the official electoral programme, which serves as a casual tool to guide the themes for subsequent publication on social media. The parties seem to operate within an autonomous logic, reacting more immediately with visually simplified messages tailored to their strategic adaptation on Instagram. Nevertheless, the electoral programme serves as the theoretical

framework and reference point that underpins the campaign. In fact, with the exception of Vox, which repeats a trivial list, the other parties publish comprehensive programmes featuring careful aesthetics and in-depth informational development. However, the lack of progress in its usage is evident. Once again, there is a noticeable absence of a direct correlation between the programme and Instagram, both in terms of the predominant themes and the relationship between the number of proposals and posts, respectively. This discrepancy, previously justified in the last elections by a preference for topics linked to national political events, is now expressed through an increased interest in the discourse surrounding the generic campaign image. This messaging, favoured by most candidates, is explicitly disconnected from party programmes and also involves a high level of electoral propaganda. This reality suggests a selective strategy, possibly an attempt to create a more localized connection by focusing on issues that resonate with voters' identities. In this way, Instagram shifts the candidate's profile from a mere political actor to a brand that deeply resonates with regional identity. It increasingly focuses on (and adapts to) issues that directly affect citizens' immediate environment rather than on political-administrative matters. As a result, the parties demonstrate a balanced and diversified strategy by utilizing both types of messaging, enhancing the effectiveness of the candidate's political communication.

It is worth noting the profile of Díaz Ayuso (People's Party), who, without engaging in party activities or programmatic content, chooses to focus on campaign and personal arguments as part of her selective and strategic approach. This indicates a strategy based solely on the direct connection between an implicit discourse of figurative values related to Madrid and her personal identity, which enhances the individuality of the candidate (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro, 2018) and highlights a particular vision of the Community through Instagram. Additionally, it is important to remember that Díaz Ayuso (PP) has the highest number of followers and a strong fan community (Caro-Castaño et al., 2024) that supports her with over 84,000 *likes* for a personal photograph of the candidate, making it the most well-received post. Thus, her strategy appears to respond positively and directly to the interests of her electorate, potentially achieving a broader impact than the other candidates, who, despite having more posts, have a smaller audience. In fact, the most engaged posts from the other candidates yield mixed results, even though they focus on more specific and concrete aspects related to the programmatic nature of the shared content. However, it is important to note that Lobato (PSOE) and García (MM) publish more campaign-related messaging. This pattern suggests a lack of a systematic model to ensure success in terms of participation and engagement. This approach warrants examination in future research, as it may indicate the foundations of a new and progressive model of interaction or emotional connection with users, as well as its impact on the public perception of candidates and voting decisions. Furthermore, engagement is deemed crucial for understanding and measuring the effectiveness of communication and the perception of leadership. This aspect is linked to other complementary variables, such as the integration of electoral programmes on other social media platforms or the comparison between regional and national perspectives –specific areas that merit further exploration in future studies.

Another point to consider is the messaging centred around the political rival. Although this tactic is frequently employed, it does not play a decisive role. It is not a priority in the candidates' posts unless it is necessary to reinforce their positioning among the electorate, serving as a normalized tactic between opposing positions. This fact reflects a conscious adaptation to the expectations of Instagram users (Parmelee and Roman, 2019), where the personal political branding of candidates takes precedence between electoral calls.

Regardless of the role played by the electoral programme, the campaign and the confrontation with opponents, there is an immediate partisan connection between the posts made and their political intent. As seen in previous elections, this association does not follow a uniform strategy; however, it does help clarify the ideological profile and priorities of the candidates. Instagram is thus anchored as a platform necessary for disseminating proposals. As such, the increase in posts during the latest electoral campaign highlights a greater awareness of the political communication practices that shape campaign strategies, supporting the main hypothesis.

The programmatic messaging across various thematic lines continue to be utilized by most political groups, although there is a clear predominance of the left. It is evident that these parties feel the need to explain their policies and programmatic proposals, paying close attention to detail in their posts. Additionally, there is a more heterogeneous distribution of content, with less concentration on specific thematic lines and a more mobilizing character (Gamir-Ríos, Cano-Orón, and Lava-Santos, 2022), in contrast to the right-wing parties. This disparity once again reflects the differing priorities and strategic approaches, thereby validating the first complementary hypothesis. However, programmatic arguments remain subordinate to the promotion of the leader's image and the electoral context. As a result, the theme of the post remains intrinsically linked to the space in which the candidate shapes their staged representation, as well as the textual content that complements the post. Thus, an electoral action plan is essential for the design and construction of this messaging, thereby affirming the second complementary hypothesis.

Although the thematic selection of the posts still does not follow a recognized pattern, there is once again a tendency towards social policies, appropriately contextualized based on communities and regions. Most messages highlight key ideas that summarize the candidate's political message and viewpoint, thereby projecting a strong image of their most relevant skills as a future leader. Furthermore, the connection with the local audience is crucial, as it fosters identification and affinity with the candidate's more professional profile, which is further strengthened by a consistent emotional connection to the region in a significant number of posts. Thus, the promotion of this civic engagement, characteristic of the recent elections, strengthens the public and political space as the most suitable medium for solidifying programmatic action plans and political management, confirming the third complementary hypothesis.

The implementation of these tactics remains a recurring action aimed at consolidating each leader's unique identity and differentiating the political ideologies among candidates. The elections for the Community of Madrid highlight the growing importance of Instagram, showcasing stronger strategies and a continuously evolving professionalization for more efficient management, although still lacking a defined model. Consequently, this electoral call has acted as a catalyst, facilitating the enhancement and refinement of Instagram as a strategic and crucial channel for political communication and connection with potential voters.

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6. Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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