Spanish 2011 electoral campaign on TV: Agendas, parties and economic crisis.

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Abstract

This paper tries to analyse how the electoral campaign in the Spanish General Election (20th November, 2011) was developed. Taking the agenda-setting approach as the main theoretical framework of reference, the main topics discussed by political actors involved in the campaign will be identified. We are expecting to find as the main issue the economic crisis and its expansion in Spain, but we want to explore how the main political parties managed and framed this topic, and how the media portrayed this struggle.

Methodologically talking, we will content analysed TV everyday news broadcasts at prime time (TVE1, Antena 3, La Cuatro, Telecinco, La Sexta), during the official electoral campaign. This specific period goes from the 4th November to the 19th November 2011.

We expect to explore the framing of the economic crisis by the media, as well as other important campaign issues and, of course, how the main media was align with the major political parties.

Introduction

One interesting point to explore during electoral campaigns has to do with the struggle between political parties and mass media, in order to control the public agenda.

During electoral processes, candidates and political parties try to monopolise the discussion about particular topics, and attempt that journalists inform mainly about these topics, creating this ranked list of important issues, that is, the campaign agenda. Obviously, this agenda must be coherent with their political programme and, even more important, those news must be framed with favourable discursive arguments.
The strategic importance of these processes during campaign is visible, since electoral news root political challenges for candidates and display how candidates face social problems and show is their capacity to sort them out. Therefore, political parties media strategy is quite determined by the following goal: mass media have to inform as to the issues that are advantageous for them and/or damage the opposition. This point was established by Robertson (1976), who stated that parties are not designing the electoral competition around the basis of “in favor of/against” regarding a specific issue, but choosing the topics that potentially are convenient for them in electoral terms.

From the voters point of view, the agenda-building tries to explain why certain information as to specific issues is available for the public, in detriment to others (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

The particular electoral context of 2011 general elections was defined by the economic crisis that Spain was (and still is) going through. Those economic problems started in this country as part of a world financial crisis, and continued as part of the European sovereign debt crisis, which affected more severely to souther European countries and, that in the specific case of Spain, was deepened by long-term loans, the building market crash, and a critical increase of the unemployment.

In previous electoral campaigns, the economy was not among political priorities of citizens, since from mid nineties the main economic indicators showed a clear economic growth. On the contrary, Spain has been suffering the problem of terrorism for more than three decades, and this specific campaign issue was always in first positions. Linked to the political violence in the Basque Country, there was a deep discussion about the territorial distribution of political power and nationalism.

This paper tries to explore the development to the electoral campaign in terms of media coverage, in order to clarify how the political agenda was built, who was showing more influence in the process of the building of this agenda, and how was the media behaviour regarding this two developments.

**Theoretical Frame**

As Bernard C. Cohen stated it is out of discussion that mass media show a
particular ability to orientate citizens concerning those issues which importance is considered of a specific relevance. Thus, there is no doubt that the media is much more than a simple provider of information and opinions, since, as this author observed, the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963: 13).

Agenda-setting theory was formally developed by McCombs and Shaw in a research based on the significance of the correlation between the issues underlined by media during the American presidential elections in 1968, and the priorities perceived by voters. In general, the agenda-setting theory assumes that the way people perceive the world is influenced directly and in a measurable manner by social mass media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Notwithstanding, social processes are in general never depending on one single cause, and the agenda-setting is not configured as one exception in that sense, but more than 40 years of research and more than cents of published studies have demonstrated the enormous influence of media.

As stated by McCombs, one of the most recognised scholars on this field, the term agenda-setting comes from the notion that mass media are able to transfer the relevance of one news located in their agenda into the society (McCombs, 1996: 16-17). Consequently, we can understand by agenda-setting the potential of media in order to direct public attention towards certain issues and, therefore, in order to configure political priorities.

Donald Shaw and Shannon Martin (1992: 903) pointed out that the ability of mass media is not only based on generating agreement about particular issues that have been underlined, but also (and even more) in stimulating discussion and dialogue.

To conclude this part, is important to mention the academic relevance of some other closed concepts to the complicated and multifaceted process of the agenda setting: priming and framing. Lippmann offered a clear and illustrative description of those notions: Every single newspaper is the result of a set of selections as to the topics that are going to be finally printed, their location, the extension provided for them, and the emphasis given. Here there are not objective rules, but conventions. (Lippmann, 1964: 257).
Additionally, as a research strategy we are going to deal with the latent differences between countries in the western world. Different countries have different media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Norris, 2004), and different journalistic cultures (Cohen et al., 1996; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Furthermore, in different countries there are different states of political affairs – political decisions, legislative bills, economic growth etc. (Luengo, 2006: 62). Following the model proposed by Hallin and Mancini, Spain is included within the group of countries labelled as Polarised Pluralist, or Mediterranean, which is characterised by the integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the State (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 11). This model is based on political and media specificities, therefore tries to capture significant characteristics of media systems and political systems in different democracies, and they provide an interesting frame that enable classifications of individual cases. Regarding political system attributes, the three models differ in respect to patterns of conflict or consensus, majoritarian or consensus government, individual vs. organized pluralism, the role of the State and the importance of rational legal authority (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 69). They also display different media system particularities with regard to the degree of political parallelism, the strength and importance of newspapers as opposed to broadcasting media, the degree of journalistic professionalisation and the role of the State in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 67).

The Spanish media system is quite television-centric. According to the data presented by the European Social Survey\(^1\), 22.7 percent of Spaniards watch television for more than three hours per day but newspaper sales are 129.4 per 1000 adult citizens in Spain, approximately four times less than in Sweden (Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008: 550). Due to 40 years of an authoritarian regime and the lack of press freedom during that period, professionalisation of journalism started later in Spain than in many other contemporary democracies. This had led observers to characterize the situation in Spain with regards to this journalistic dynamic as the ‘incomplete professionalisation’ (Ortega and Humanes, 2000: 162–8).

From the normative point of view, Spanish journalism is independent, but the truth is that Spanish newspapers tend to belong to a clear ideological orientation, and

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\(^1\) European Social Survey Round 5 Data (2010). Data file edition 2.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway - Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.
that they, to some extent, are quite hostile (Cotarelo, 2002: 191). This polarized pluralist model reproduces social divisions in the structures of Spanish journalism, which often cover processes and events in a partial way. This is what López-Escobar (2008: 185–86) refer to as entrenched journalism.

Method and Hypotheses

Research on electoral campaigns is quite often focused on the potential political effects of media behaviour, mainly on the electoral outcomes after the voting day. Given the main objectives of this study, we are going to pay attention to the way mass media, and in this case television, portrayed the electoral struggle, described and selected campaign issues, and how those were emphasised by different candidates.

As it has been already shown, the political context of this electoral process was characterised by a profound economic crisis. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Even the economy was a secondary issue during last electoral campaigns, in 2011 economic crisis irrupts as the main campaign issue, determining the political agenda.

Thus far, if we assume that economic questions are a traditional issue of the right, conservative political parties will try to monopolise the economy as one of their main points of their campaign agendas strategy in a more intensive way. This process explain our second hypothesis:

H2: Conservative issues were more relevant during the campaign, in detriment to those traditionally restricted by the left.

If the assumptions of the polarised pluralism hypothesis are correct, countries located in the south of Europe tend to have a more politicised media. Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

H3: Even the economic issues were more relevant, those channels that have shown a more conservationist bias in their political coverage, portrayed the economic crisis more intensively than others.
Regarding the methodological approach, we choose the content analysis as the main research technique. The media outlet to analyse in order to verify the hypotheses is television, although the printed press (daily newspapers) were also part of the previous sample, and is planned to be included in forthcoming studies.

We content analysed television everyday news broadcasts at prime time (20:30 or 21:00) of the main national channels: the public channel, TVE1, and the privates Antena 3, La Cuatro, Telecinco and La Sexta. The period under examination is the official electoral campaign, that in the Spanish case went from the 4th to the 19th November, 2011. Reliability tests were run to guarantee the quality of the coding procedure.

The final sample was constituted by 302 different TV news distributed by channel in the following way: TVE1 (71 news, 23,5 percent), Antena 3 (60 news, 19,9 percent), La 4 (66 news, 21,9 percent), Telecinco (54 news, 17,9 percent), La Sexta (51 news, 16,9 percent).

Findings and Discussion

The first point we need to have a deep look at is the range of visibility of different topics during the electoral campaign on TV. The Figure 1 shows the number of mentions that different issues were had on TV broadcasts. This dimension was coded in 3 different variables (Main topic of the news, second topic -if any-, final topic if any), so the final variable is the result of a simple computing process that merged the three of them in one variable by topic. Economic issues are the second important topic in numerical terms at the aggregated level but, given that the “horserace” (also “campaign”) issues is part of the regular contemporary coverage of electoral campaigns, we can underline that allusions to economic issues are located in a very prominent position. It is also quite interesting to notice in the graph how other significant traditional topics in last Spanish electoral campaigns, as for example “terrorism”, “welfare state” or “corruption”, lost their weight (Luengo, 2008). If we go to the details, we realise that in the coding process economic issues were not the most significant as the first topic of the news (actually the fourth, after “horserace”, “Debate” and “campaign”), but it was the second important issue as the second topic after
“horserace”, and the first most important third topic. This dynamic shows how economic issues appeared at news in a consistent basis, although perhaps not as main topic.

Figure 1.
Mentions to topics on TV²

![Bar chart showing mentions to topics on TV]

SOURCE: Self coding data.

It is also interesting that if we compare this data with those referring to previous campaigns, the “unity of the State” and the “terrorism” were the main topics for the conservatives, while the “welfare state” was the traditional topic of the social democrats (Luengo, 2008). During 2011 elections, social protection issues, impulsed by the left, were reduced in a very profound manner, also terrorism, but the conservatives took advantage of the unprecedented situation and managed to keep the attention of media more convincingly. The explanation is not that difficult to guess: Spain there is going

² In the original codebook, there were more than 30 different issues included. For this frequencies analysis we run a recodification in the following terms: 1. Welfare State (Education, Medical care, housing, Pensions, Social services cuts); 2. International (EU, International); 3. Horserace (polls, forthcoming electoral results, speculations as to future government); 4. Televised debate (Rajoy Vs Rubalcaba debate); 5. Campaign (Candidates interviews, televised secondary debates, party organisation of campaign, electoral programmes); 6. Spanish Revolution (Citizens participation, 15M movement); 7. Terrorism (terrorism, peace process, civil security); 8. Corruption (corruption); 9. Economic Crisis (Unemployment, economic crisis). Other dimensions incorporated (e.g. Religion, environment, electoral system reform, etc.) where not significant in numerical terms with really few cases.
through the worst economic crisis in decades, and Spain was under a social democrat government when the first sights of the financial appeared.

The Figure 2 illustrates how the topic economy developed during the campaign. Generally talking, the intensity with which the crisis emerged as an issue on TV broadcasts is more located in the second half of the campaign, where the highest peaks are. When we find a “down” at the graph there are significant events that moved the salience of the crisis towards other issues: The 7th of November the electoral televised debate between two main candidates, Mariano Rajoy and Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, took place, and that is why there is only one news containing as one of the three main topics the crisis; the 13th of November the prime minister from Italy, Berlusconi, left finally the power and also important preelectoral polls were published, something that help to explain that there was no mention as to the economic crisis.

![Figure 2](source: Self coding data.)

Other determining aspect to examine, is how different TV channels, that in the Spanish case are supposed to show different political and ideological biases, portrayed the crisis as one of the main alluded campaign issues. The Table 1 shows the percentage
of general mentions compared to those specifically referred to the economic crisis. With this data we can easily identify which channel “overweight” in terms of coverage the crisis. At that moment, there were two channels with an editorial line very closed to the right ideological identification: Antena 3 and Telecinco. Surprisingly enough, exactly those channels mentioned more intensively crisis than other channels, a trend specially visible in the case of Antena 3, with almost 6 points of difference. The proportion by which the public TV, Televisión Española (TVE1), La 4 and La Sexta covered the crisis was much less represented compared to the coverage of the rest of issues. These three TV channels were more inclined to a social democrat ideological predisposition, including the public TV, since in polarised pluralist models the intervention of the government on the management of public radio and TV stations is quite explicit.

Table 1
Proportion of “Crisis” mentions by TV Channel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TVE1</td>
<td>23,50%</td>
<td>21,80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antena 3</td>
<td>19,90%</td>
<td>25,60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La 4</td>
<td>21,90%</td>
<td>17,90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecinco</td>
<td>17,90%</td>
<td>19,20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Sexta</td>
<td>16,90%</td>
<td>15,40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Self coding data.

In consequence, Hypotheses 1 and 2 proof to be right, with the slight nuances already mentioned. The economy was a secondary issue during past electoral campaigns in Spain but in 2011 economic crisis was recorded as the main campaign issue, determining the political agenda. The conservative party, Partido Popular, manage to control the political agenda, probably helped by the context, and monopolised the economy as one of their main points of their campaign agendas strategy, something that media, in this case TV, adopted an reflected in their coverage. Conservative issues were more relevant during the campaign, in detriment to those traditionally restricted by the social democrats, Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE).
Hypothesis 3 proofs to be also true. Given that Spain is one of the clear countries belonging the polarised pluralism or Mediterranean model, those channels that have shown a more conservationist bias in their political coverage (Antena 3 and Telecinco), portrayed economic crisis more intensively compared to those more in the ideological left (TVE1, La 4, La Sexta).

References


