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The Negative Campaign on Telegram: The Political Use of Criticism during the 2021 Community of Madrid Elections

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Abstract: Mobile instant messaging services have become a standard tool for political actors in communicating with citizens, especially during electoral campaigns. Telegram predominates in this context of disintermediated communication with the electorate. This platform enables parties to issue electoral information while taking advantage of this private space to criticize their adversaries. They do it with messages linked to negative emotions that generate a deeper impact on the audience, although they imply risks such as political polarization. This research analyzes the use of criticism to the adversary by political parties on Telegram during the electoral campaign. For this purpose, a descriptive study with an exploratory purpose was chosen, and a quantitative content analysis was carried out on 710 messages published on Telegram by the main political parties that stood for the elections to the Community of Madrid held in 2021. These parties are the PP, Ciudadanos, Podemos, Más Madrid, and Vox. The PSOE has been excluded as they did not make any publication during the analyzed period. The results show that criticizing the adversary is an emerging communication strategy in political parties on Telegram. Unlike other social media such as Facebook, the attacks on rivals are used on this platform mainly by the parties in the government, who focus their criticism on the president of the Spanish state. The attacks are mainly directed at the professional trajectory of their rivals and question the credibility of any action carried out by them.

Keywords: political communication; polarization; criticism; mobile instant messaging services; Telegram; Community of Madrid



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1. Introduction

The technological changes that have occurred in recent decades have transformed electoral campaigns. Currently, the digital environment is the primary stage for both parties and leaders. Traditional media are no longer the exclusive issuers of information because social media is capable of disseminating their messages without any type of filter or limitation (Casero-Ripollés 2018; Chadwick 2013). Therefore, they have become a preferential space for political actors to disseminate political information. Although the relationship between politics and communication is not new, this phenomenon seems to have sparked renewed academic interest in recent years (Rivas-de Roca et al. 2022).

Both parties and candidates have seen the need to incorporate these platforms as new channels to share campaign information and political proposals and to mobilize the vote to achieve the participation of their electorate (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2021; Jungherr et al. 2020; Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo 2020; Baviera et al. 2019; López-Meri et al. 2017). The use of these platforms is particularly accentuated during electoral campaign periods, when parties intensify their presence on social media (Elishar-Malka et al. 2020; Stier et al. 2018; Vergeer 2015).

Along with social media, the digital environment offers new tools for the communicative activity of politicians. Smartphones have become the primary Internet access device internationally and in Spain (Fundación Telefónica 2020). The Life Mobile Style has led to an increase in the consumption of political information through mobile devices (Guzmán

and Medero 2016). In this scenario, mobile instant messaging platforms have recently erupted with force and are currently a primary channel of political communication between parties and citizens.

Mobile instant messaging platforms facilitate conversations in closed environments since messages reach users' devices through private conversations without others being able to access them (Vermeer et al. 2021). They are built on a special encryption technology designed specifically for this kind of application, which turns them into the most secure messengers available on the market (Kazanin 2017). This feature makes users employ these platforms to create smaller and private social groups instead of more inclusive and open social media (Valeriani and Vaccari 2018). In this sense, some authors argue that in the coming years, the communication strategies of the parties will move to Telegram to find a more direct discourse and discuss the possibility that citizens will act as viralizing agents of this content (Bigas Formatjé 2019).

The disintermediated communication of mobile instant messaging platforms and the effect of moving in an environment of trust also influence the type of content that political actors share (Hernández Escayola 2022). It enables political actors not only to disseminate information but also to criticize their adversaries and to point out their contradictions (Maier and Nai 2021) without public overexposure occurring in other social media such as Twitter or Facebook. In addition, political actors have taken advantage of the freedom of expression that characterizes mobile instant messaging platforms (Shirky 2011) while adapting their communication strategies (Stromer-Galley 2014), incorporating standard dynamics of offline communication into the online medium. Thus, elements such as a negative campaign or criticism to the adversary have achieved prominence on platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. This type of message linked to negative emotions generates a more resonant impact on the audience, although it implies risks such as disaffection or political polarization (Berganza-Conde 2008; Patterson 1993).

Of special interest is the study of criticism and the attack on the political use of Telegram. This platform is breaking into the communication field with great force as the app that grew the most during 2020 (IAB Spain 2021). It is a free service that allows users to send and receive unrestricted messages freely and confidentially. Its recent boom in political use is linked to the possibility of establishing a closer and more personal connection with citizens (Gil 2016) and to the limitations to parties introduced by WhatsApp in 2019 in sending mass messages during electoral campaigns (Alonso 2019). As a result of the abusive use that some formations made of it during the electoral period, WhatsApp prohibited the use of computer systems, programs, or software to automate messages and send them in masse to users, thus blocking the accounts that the formations had activated in this service.

However, despite its high number of users, its growing use by parties, and its multiple potentialities, Telegram remains little explored in political communication yet (Casero-Ripollés 2018), especially during campaign periods. Its use in this field has had different effects that have been previously studied from the perspective of citizen participation (Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes 2021; Abdollahinezhad 2016; Herasimenka 2022), social movements (Su et al. 2022), and election journalism (Ameli Reza and Molaei 2020), but despite its importance, this topic has still generated a low number of research works in terms of its use as a tool of political communication by parties in elections. Specifically, the use of Telegram for negative campaigns is still unexplored. In this context, it is necessary to extend the research to analyzing the dynamics that political actors use to activate negative campaigns on this platform, which remain unexplored so far. Consequently, the study of Telegram from this perspective fills a gap in the previous literature. Furthermore, this research analyzes Telegram since, in the general elections of April 2019, WhatsApp blocked the mass dissemination of electoral content to Spanish political parties, cancelling its use as a communication tool in the campaign.

The main objective of this research is to know the degree and type of criticism used by the parties in their Telegram channels. This study examines the role of criticism and attacks on rivals in the communication on Telegram groups of the principal parties during

the campaign of the Community of Madrid elections held in 2021. The election of this electoral period is relevant for three reasons: first, it enables knowing the communication strategies carried out by political actors with a differentiated trajectory. Second, it is one of the first regional elections affected by COVID-19, which enables studying the level of incidence of a context of a health crisis in the electoral campaign. Third, we are facing a campaign marked by a high climate of political polarization, a factor that conditions the communication strategies of the different parties.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Negative Campaigning as a Political Communication Strategy

In recent years, a dynamic that has gained greater prominence in online political communication is negative campaigning. Far from being a one-off phenomenon, it has become a recurring resource in the communication strategies of political parties in Western democracies (Schweitzer 2010). The most recent evidence in the US and other international elections suggests that conservative parties are more likely to use negative campaigning (Lau and Pomper 2004). It consists of any act that involves criticizing or attacking political opponents (García Beaudoux et al. 2005; Geer 2006), either at a personal level focused on the opposite party's leader or towards their political behavior (Kaid 2003). Benoit (2014) already categorized this type of campaign message in their Functional Theory, in which they differentiated ads that praised their own strengths, those that attack the opposition to weaken the opponent, and those of defense, subject to the previous ones, in which actors and politicians defend themselves to refute the accusations of their rivals. Therefore, through arguments that can be true or false, emotions such as fear, frustration, or anger are provoked in the electorate, causing a context of high political polarization that leads to the creation of two antagonistic positions. According to Casero-Ripollés (2022), the right to self-determination is used as a source of misinformation to promote political conflict.

The recent proliferation of populist movements has contributed to the rise of negative campaigning, as they use it as a civil resistance movement against traditional governments. Populist parties show a more conflictive and aggressive personality (Nai and Martínez-Coma 2019) and develop more negative and emotional campaigns (Nai 2021), to the point that some of them focus their communication strategy more on negativity than on formulating programmatic proposals (Enli 2017). Populist rhetoric tends to reflect a transgressive political style (Oliver and Rahn 2016) and emphasizes the spectacularization of politics with a more antagonistic and hardened tone in debate (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015).

In negative campaigns, political actors focus their speeches on highlighting the adversary's mistakes and defects rather than valuing their virtues (D'Adamo and García-Beaudoux 2016; Ceron and d'Adda 2016; Valera-Ordaz and López-García 2014). On many occasions, they use warlike language to exaggerate the confrontation and gain firmer support for their extremist policies (López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat 2021). In this sense, the greater the social perception of competition between the candidate parties is, the more attractive the campaign is. Therefore, more considerable amounts of negative political information are disseminated. This type of campaign fosters contexts of polarization that decide with a high level of simplification who are the "good" and the "bad" in politics (García Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013).

In this context, previous research indicates that an attack policy is especially effective for members of the electorate with a high level of involvement in social and political conflicts (Maier and Faas 2015). This type of voter prone to reacting to political raids tends to support, in general terms, extremist and anti-system parties (Nai 2021), so they feel stimulated by campaign negativism. However, other studies suggest that political messages with a negative emotional charge are especially attractive for those voters who are not politically aligned or feel political disaffection, since perceiving political messages as threats requires an immediate response (García Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013).

All in all, negative campaigning has a curvilinear effect whose main benefits include citizen interest, the stimulation of public debate, and the simplification of the electoral decision (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991), although it entails certain risks such as the saturation of voters, empathy with the politician victim of the attack, and political intolerance, both of the attacker and the attacked (García Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2013).

2.2. The Political Use of Criticism in the Online Environment

In the same way that it happened in the 1950s with the birth of television as a reference communication medium, the use of negative campaigning has been boosted by the consolidation of digital social media as the main political communication channels of parties (Greer and LaPointe 2004; Klotz 2004). In this sense, after Brexit in the United Kingdom and the electoral triumph of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016, the role of social media as a factor of polarization and destabilization of democratic systems was observed with some concern (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2018).

Criticism has become an emerging mechanism in the online communication strategies of political actors. Specifically on Facebook, criticism was present in a quarter of the messages disseminated by political actors in the 2016 Spanish electoral campaign (Marcos-García et al. 2021). The freedom of expression offered by the digital environment, among other factors, has favored the tendency to publicly blame other parties for problems (Shirky 2011) and to show disagreement with specific ideas (Jungheer 2016; Dang-Xuan et al. 2013). In addition to criticizing the pragmatic proposals of their rivals, their ideological line, or professional trajectory, parties also attack their character traits or appearance (Maier and Nai 2021; Stevens 2012; Lau and Pomper 2004). Thus, they take advantage of the disintermediation and openness that characterizes digital platforms to introduce political criticism and attack in their online speeches.

Recent studies have shown that factors such as the ideology and the position on the government–opposition axis of the parties have a decisive influence on the use of criticism on social media such as Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021). In general terms, parties with extreme ideologies tend to criticize those who position themselves in the center (Nai and Sciarini 2018; Lau and Pomper 2004). Additionally, those on the left generally employ speeches to attack. Those political actors in the opposition introduce numerous attacks in their messages, both to the party and the leader (Marcos-García et al. 2021). Along these lines, there is also a tendency for emerging parties to differentiate themselves from their opponents by pointing out their mistakes or defects, while parties with a more consolidated track record opt for positive campaigns to highlight their achievements (Valli and Nai 2020). This dynamic differs in the Spanish case, where currently, the traditional parties focus their messages on criticizing the adversary and those with a shorter trajectory that propose actions for democratic regeneration (Marcos-García et al. 2021).

Political parties generally focus their attacks on Facebook on the professional functions conducted by their opponents—that is, on messages discrediting the decisions made by their opponents during their political careers. However, there is a growing trend towards the use of personal attacks, a fact that reduces political discourse to a confrontation between personalities (Marcos-García et al. 2021). This inclination is directly related to the phenomenon of the spectacularization of the political message. To attract more attention from users, they do so by appealing to emotions, mainly fear and enthusiasm, for political change (Abejón-Mendoza and Mayoral-Sánchez 2017).

Although some investigations have warned of the weight that criticism has reached in periods of electoral campaigns in the online environment, these studies focused on its use in social media such as Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021) or Twitter (Ceron and d'Adda 2016). However, it is still unknown how parties articulate this type of message on mobile instant messaging platforms. This dynamic leads to the following research questions:

PI1. What use do political parties make of criticism on Telegram and to who is it addressed?

PI2. What type of criticism do political parties use on Telegram and how do they do it?

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Data

The sample of this research concentrates on the campaign of the regional elections held in the Community of Madrid on 4 March 2021. In particular, the 15 official days of the campaign, the day before the election, the election day, and the day after the election have been studied. During this period, all messages shared on the Telegram channels of the Partido Popular (PP), Ciudadanos, Podemos, Más Madrid, and Vox were analyzed. The PSOE made no publication during the period analyzed and has been excluded from the sample. The sample comprises a total of 710 Telegram messages (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of the sample.

Party	Units of Analysis	
	N°	% of the Total
Partido Popular C.Madrid	355	50
Ciudadanos C.Madrid	53	7.46
Podemos C.Madrid	40	5.63
Vox C.Madrid	171	24.08
Más Madrid	91	12.82
TOTAL	710	100

Source: Self-made.

The elections to the Community of Madrid were relevant for various reasons. First, it is an electoral campaign that enables knowing the communication strategies carried out by political actors with differentiated trajectories; while the PP, Ciudadanos, and Podemos are three parties that already had representation in this autonomous community, Más Madrid and Vox ran for the first time for the presidency of the Community of Madrid. Second, we are facing one of the first regional elections marked by COVID-19, which enables us to study the level of incidence in the context of a health crisis in the electoral campaign (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2022). This factor is especially interesting in the Community of Madrid given the political tension between the regional government and the executive Pedro Sánchez over the management of the pandemic in this region. This, added to the fact that it is an early electoral call by the president of the Madrid Government, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, given a vote of no coincidence by Ciudadanos and the PSOE, makes this an electoral campaign characterized by a climate of high political polarization. It is a context that, as recent studies have highlighted, is especially interesting for the analysis of political criticism given the emergence of digital negativity as a communication strategy (Moret-Soler et al. 2022).

The selection of Telegram as an object of study is due to its growing social relevance and recent rise in popularity in the field of political communication. For the analysis of criticism, given the private nature that characterizes them, the study of mobile instant messaging services is more original since there is no public overexposure of the political actors in these applications as opposed to other social media such as Twitter or Facebook. In addition, this research analyzes Telegram since, in the April 2019 general elections, WhatsApp blocked the mass dissemination of electoral content from Spanish political parties, thus eliminating its use as a campaign communication tool.

3.2. Analysis

The methodology applied in this research consists of a quantitative content analysis. The objective is to analyze the presence of criticism in the communication strategy of political parties on Telegram. For this, an analysis model composed of 6 variables and 20 study categories is proposed (Table 2) (Marcos-García et al. 2021). In the case of the variables related to the type of and reason for criticism, the model is adapted to the proposal of García Beaudoux and D'Adamo (2013) for the study of negative campaigning.

Table 2. Summary of the analysis model used in this research.

Use of Criticism	
Yes	The message contains criticism or attack.
No	The message does not contain criticism or attack.
Who is the Criticism Directed at?	
Political party	The criticism is directed at a certain political party.
Politician	The criticism is directed at a certain politician.
Media or journalist	Criticism is directed at a particular media outlet, program, or journalist.
Institution or public organization	The criticism is directed at a specific institution or public organization (government, autonomous community, town hall, etc.).
Business or businessman	The criticism is directed at a certain employer or company.
Others	The criticism is directed at another type of actor not mentioned in the previous categories.
Typology of Criticism	
Personal	The criticism or attack is directed at the personal characteristics or qualities of a certain actor.
Biography	The criticism or attack is directed at the functions or positions previously developed by a certain actor.
Political program	The criticism or attack is directed at the pragmatic proposals of a certain actor in relation to a specific topic or issue.
Ideology	The criticism or attack focuses on the ideology and values of a certain actor.
Intensity of Criticism	
Predominant	Messages in which a certain actor is directly criticized.
Collateral	Messages in which a certain actor is criticized, but the attack remains in the background. The main function of the message is not criticism.
Critique Structure	
Simple	Messages where only a certain actor is criticized.
Compared	Messages in which a certain actor is criticized while emphasizing and highlighting the positive aspects and merits of the person who performs it.
Execution/Reason for Criticism	
Data-driven	The criticism or attack is based on data or information, as well as on statements that the criticized actor has previously made.
Emotional	The criticism or attack is based on language that evokes negative emotions or feelings such as fear, indignation, anger, or disappointment.
Ethical	The criticism or attack questions the credibility of a proposal or action conducted by a certain actor.
Humor/ridicule	The criticism or attack is delivered from a humorous perspective to ridicule one or more actors.

Source: [Marcos-García et al. \(2021\)](#).

The messages were downloaded manually from the Telegram Desktop application via screenshot. The intercoder reliability was calculated using Scott's pi formula on 130 messages (18.31% of the sample), obtaining a level of 0.92. After its coding, statistical treatment was conducted with the SPSS program (v.28). To study the independence between the

categorical variables, the chi-square test was applied. The significance value that was established is <0.05 .

4. Results

4.1. What Use of Criticism Do Political Parties Make on Telegram?

In the 2021 Community of Madrid election campaign, an emerging use of criticism was detected in the communication strategies proposed by political parties on Telegram. Of the total number of messages published, 27.2% contained criticism or political attacks on the adversary (Figure 1). These data indicate that although it is not a major resource, its presence to a greater or lesser extent in the publications of all political parties defines an incipient trend in the use of Telegram as a tool for political communication.

Generally speaking, if we look at the results within each party, they reveal that the party of Ciudadanos is, in proportion, the one that disseminated the most extensive number of attacks within its communication strategy (37.7%), followed by the PP (34.9%) and Vox (22.8%) (Figure 1). These parties dedicated a large part of their publications to criticizing the mistakes or actions of their rival parties on Telegram.

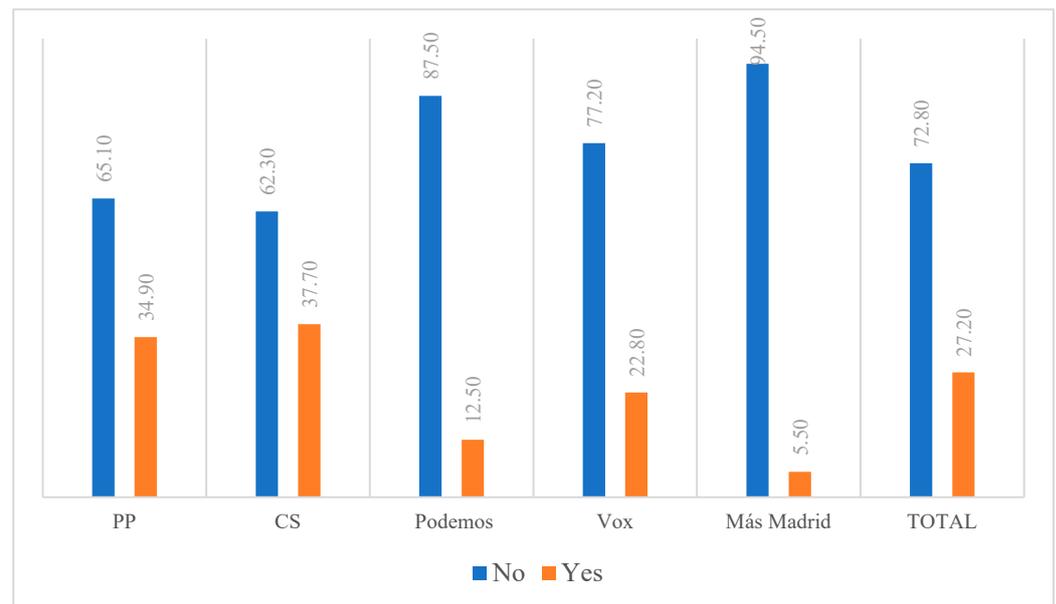


Figure 1. Presence of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties (% within the user). Source: Self-made.

In this context, if we analyze the data in detail, we can verify that ideology is related to the use that parties make of criticism on Telegram ($\chi^2(1) = 31,016$; $p < 0.001$). It can be seen how the right-wing parties (PP, Vox, and Ciudadanos) produced the most attacks on their publications on this platform (25.8%) (Table 3). The left-wing parties (Podemos and Más Madrid) hardly resorted to this resource (1.4%) (Table 3).

Secondly, the data reveal that the government/opposition axis also influences the management of political criticism ($\chi^2(1) = 31,881$; $p < 0.001$). The data based on this axis present patterns similar to those described above, as the PP and Ciudadanos represented the government, being parties with a conservative ideology. In this sense, the parties that constitute the government of the Community of Madrid are the ones that, in general terms, resorted more frequently to criticism in their messages. They directed most of their attacks towards the Spanish president, Pedro Sánchez, intending to weaken his figure (20.3%) (Table 3). However, the opposition parties, especially Podemos and Más Madrid, did not make prominent use of attacking the adversary on Telegram (6.9%) (Table 3).

Ultimately, the analysis confirmed that the use of criticism on Telegram was conditioned by the political trajectory of the parties ($\chi^2(1) = 22.642$; $p < 0.001$). In this case, the

parties with the most extensive political experience in the Madrid Assembly, namely the PP, Ciudadanos, and Podemos (21.0%) (Table 3), were the ones that criticized more often than those who were running for the presidency of this community for the first time, such as Más Madrid and Vox (6.2%) (Table 3). These attacks were generally used to differentiate themselves from new parties and demonstrate their political expertise.

Table 3. Presence of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties based on axes (%).

Criticism	Ideology Axis		Government/Opposition Axis		Biography Axis	
	Right	Left	Government	Opposition	Old	New
No	55.8	17	37.2	35.6	42.1	30.7
Yes	25.8	1.4	20.3	6.9	21	6.2

Source: Self-made.

Concerning the target of the attacks, the criticism was mainly pointed at another rival political party (43.52%) (Figure 2). However, it is worth noting that the high number of messages containing individualized criticism of a political actor revealed a tendency towards negative personalization on Telegram. It is especially relevant in the case of Más Madrid, which devoted 40% of its publications to personal criticisms (Figure 2), specifically to the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso. The PP and Ciudadanos also stand out in this regard, having dedicated 28.13% and 25% of their publications (Figure 2) to criticizing other political actors, respectively, positioning the President of the Spanish Government, Pedro Sánchez, at the center of their attacks. It is interesting to note that only 0.52% of the messages containing criticism were addressed to the media and companies (Figure 2).

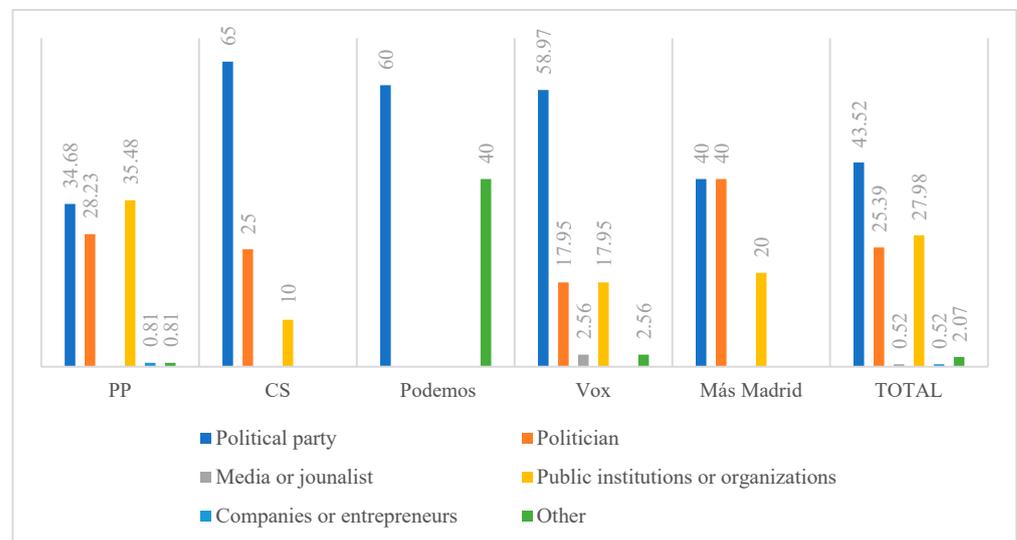


Figure 2. Subjects of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties (% within the user). Source: Self-made.

4.2. How Do Political Parties Criticize on Telegram?

Regarding how parties conducted their criticism on Telegram, the analysis shows that attacking the biography of rivals was the type of mechanism most exploited by political parties. Of all the messages containing any criticism, 68.39% did so by discrediting the decisions and actions conducted by other parties (Figure 3). Más Madrid and the PP prioritized this strategy over other attacks (100% and 73.39%, respectively) (Figure 3).

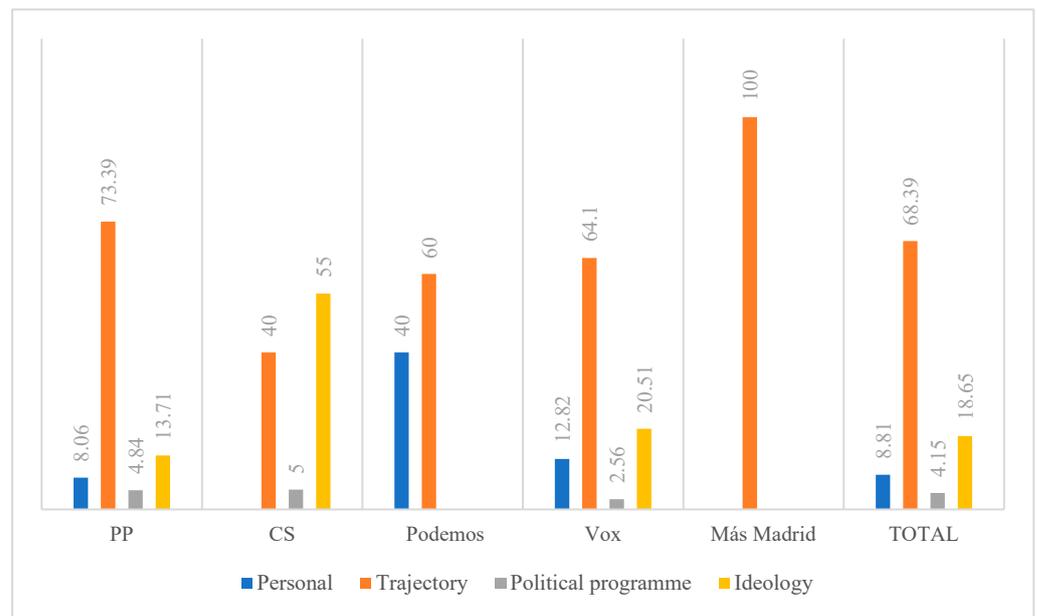


Figure 3. Typology of criticism in Telegram messages from political parties (% within the user). Source: Self-made.

The second type of criticism most used by the parties was attacks on ideological values (18.65%) (Figure 3). The case of Ciudadanos stands out since 55% of its publications containing any criticism did so by pointing out values and ideas of certain tendencies contrary to its own, especially socialism (Figure 3). Although personal criticism was only present in 8.81% of the messages that contained an attack (Figure 3), it was a notable dynamic in Podemos' Telegram strategy. Forty percent of their criticisms articulated the attributes, traits, and other personal aspects of their rivals (Figure 3), specifically those of the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, and other members of her match.

In the analysis of how political parties carry out their criticism on Telegram, the data obtained revealed three significant trends: first, regarding the intensity of the attacks, in 72.02% of the messages that contained some criticism, it remained in the foreground of the publication (Table 4). This dynamic occurred at similar levels in the strategy of all the parties analyzed, which means that criticism was used on Telegram to directly attack their rivals. The left-wing parties Podemos and Más Madrid stand out in this strategy. In 80% of their publications that contained some criticism (Table 4), the attack was the predominant function in the message.

This dynamic complements how parties structured their criticism on Telegram. The results revealed that they mostly used simple attacks. Along these lines, in 83.94% of the critical messages, a certain actor was attacked without highlighting the positive aspects and merits of the person (Table 4). That is to say, there was no comparison between the criticized actor and the criticizer, but rather the attack was executed in only one direction to emphasize the opponent's mistakes. It is worth mentioning in this regard the absolute priority that Vox gave to this form of structuring its criticism (100%) (Table 4), thus proposing a totally destructive attack for their addressee.

Finally, the third strategy detected in the analysis referring to how parties make criticisms on Telegram, their reason for existing. Parties generally questioned the credibility of a proposal or action conducted by a specific political actor. That is, they attacked their rivals mainly based on ethical reasons (84.97%) (Table 4), focusing their offensives on evaluating the party's lack of honesty, a leader, an institution, or an action carried out by some of these. All the parties analyzed prioritized this practice of making their criticisms

on this platform. However, Más Madrid stands out for doing so in all the messages they disseminated with attacks during the campaign (100%) (Table 4).

Table 4. How political parties criticize on Telegram (% within the user).

		PP	CS	Podemos	Vox	Más Madrid	TOTAL
Intensity	Predominant	72.58	55.0	80.0	76.92	80.0	72.02
	Collateral	27.42	45.0	20.0	23.08	20.0	27.98
Structure	Simple	80.65	85.0	60.0	94.87	100.0	83.94
	Compared	19.35	15.0	40.0	5.13	0.0	16.06
Execution	Based on data	0.81	0.0	40.0	0	0.0	1.55
	Emotional	12.1	15.0	0.0	5.13	0.0	10.36
	Ethical	83.06	85.0	60.0	92.31	100.0	84.97
	Humorous/ridicule	4.03	0.0	0.0	2.56	0.0	3.11

Source: Self-made.

In this context, it is interesting to highlight the percentages registered for the rest of the categories analyzed in this variable. The second most common reason for political parties to spread criticisms on Telegram was for emotional attacks (10.36%) (Table 4). These messages contained expressions to evoke negative emotions such as anger or rage. On the other hand, comical or funny attacks and criticisms based on empirical information registered residual values. The political parties did not use criticism on Telegram to ridicule other actors (3.11%) (Table 4), and they did not show a particular interest in discrediting their rivals with credibility and legitimacy provided by data (1.55%) (Table 4).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The research results permit us to establish relevant contributions on the role of criticism in the communication strategies of political parties on Telegram. These original contributions can be extrapolated to other electoral contexts outside the Spanish sphere, particularly to those countries with similar political and media systems, such as those of southern European countries (e.g., Portugal, Italy, Greece, and France).

The first finding reveals the presence of criticism as a strategic resource in party communication on Telegram (PI1). Although it is still an emerging use, as detected on Facebook in the Spanish electoral campaign of 2016 (Marcos-García et al. 2021), the parties have begun to introduce criticism and attacks in their messages on Telegram to express disagreement with the actions of rivals or the proposals that they put forward (Jungheer 2016; Dang-Xuan et al. 2013). Furthermore, the private environment that characterizes Telegram enables parties to present a direct discourse condemning the errors and contradictions that the rest of the parties may have made (D'Adamo and García-Beaudox 2016; Ceron and d'Adda 2016; Valera-Ordaz and López-García 2014) without being exposed to the public overexposure to which they are subjected on other social media (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán 2020; Terrasa 2019). An ideological use of this platform was observed, a fact that could lead to an increase in the polarization of the electorate (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2022).

In this context, the analysis results have shown that the ideological inclination of a party, its position on the government/opposition axis, and its political trajectory are determining factors in its use of criticism on Telegram. This idea reveals another of the relevant findings of this study, since the trends detected on Telegram in this regard are opposite to those identified from other social media such as Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021). On the one hand, ideology is decisive in the political attacks on Telegram as right-wing parties use it the most in their digital communication strategies, while left-wing parties employ Facebook the most. Contrary to what the previous literature on criticism indicates (Nai and Sciarini 2018; Lau and Pomper 2004), Telegram brings something distinct: it is not the parties located at the ideological extremes that criticize the moderate parties

with greater frequency and intensity. In this case, Ciudadanos and the Partido Popular, both moderate conservative parties, were the most critical of the PSOE, a moderate progressive party, especially against its actions connected to the national political framework.

Contrary to what happened on Facebook, parties in governance presented the most significant number of attacks in their Telegram messages, while the opposition parties hardly resorted to this resource. It is interesting to note that most of the criticism disseminated by these government parties was not directed at rival parties at the regional level but concentrated on the state government, showing the national significance of these regional elections given the evident political confrontation between Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Madrid Assembly, and Pedro Sánchez, president of the Spanish government. This caused the PP of the Community of Madrid to use Telegram to discredit the policies of the Spanish government led by its main opposition party, the PSOE.

Lastly, political biography is also a parameter that conditions the use of political criticism on Telegram. In this case, the patterns detected on Facebook at the national level were repeated (Marcos-García et al. 2021). Thus, parties with the most extensive political experience in the Madrid Assembly tended to criticize most frequently on this platform. This suggests that the attacks were a self-defense mechanism against the possible rise of new parties that increased electoral competitiveness.

Another relevant contribution of the study is related to the addressees of the criticism used by political parties on Telegram. These criticisms focused on discrediting rival parties. Thus, during the electoral period, the parties converged their communication efforts on exhibiting the weaknesses of their opponents, while other actors linked to politics such as the media or public institutions received almost no criticism. Therefore, the parties benefited from the direct and private communication that characterizes this mobile application to prioritize the electoral competition with the aim of obtaining more votes at the polls.

Regarding the types of criticism used (PI2), the parties emphasized attacks on the political history and biography of the rivals, focusing on the functions or positions previously developed by them. They tried to discredit the behavior of the rest of the parties in their professional activities. In contrast, they did not consider Telegram useful to criticize the personality traits or image of rival leaders. This shows that it is a medium with low personalization. In this respect, the parties articulated criticism in their communication strategies on Telegram around ethical reasons and, contrary to what was detected on Facebook (Abejón-Mendoza and Mayoral-Sánchez 2017), left emotions in the background. The parties launched direct offensives at their opponents and did not take advantage of the attacks to compare themselves and highlight their own positive aspects and merits.

All in all, the research results show that criticism on Telegram is a strategic resource beginning to manifest in the field of digital political communication. The use of it has increased compared to the 2016 general elections on Facebook. Thus, a growing trend may be the cause of political polarization. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the political attacks on Telegram present, in general terms, a more rational profile than those registered on Facebook (Marcos-García et al. 2021).

The main limitation of this research is that it is a single case study and lacks a comparison with other electoral campaigns. Future lines of research must study this political communication resource beyond the electoral period and thus verify whether the trends detected follow the same dynamics during ordinary political activity or if it is a one-off event. As recent studies point out (Moret-Soler et al. 2022), the advance of political polarization and the attacks on rivals suggest that a change of cycle is taking place, and these new trends will be consolidated in digital political communication. In this sense, this exploratory research is a starting point to understand how political parties have benefited from the characteristics of mobile instant messaging services to introduce criticism as a strategic resource for digital political communication.

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