

## The impact of the social media on political campaigns: the 2023 general election in Spain

El impacto de las redes sociales en la campaña política: elecciones generales de 2023 en España

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the transformations in the dynamics of communication brought about by advances in digital technology, and the intersection between politics and technological development, especially in relation to social media. The study consisted of a content analysis of the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok by political party leaders Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Alberto Núñez (PP), Santiago Abascal (Vox), and Yolanda Díaz (Sumar). The results showed a general increase in followers, with greater growth on newer platforms. Candidates adopted different strategies in terms of frequency and type of posts, depending on context of use, but maintained a strong presence on all platforms. The findings highlight the complexity of digital political communication and the consequente need for flexible

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adaptive strategies that take into account the characteristics of each medium, audience diversity, and the rapid evolution of online dynamics.

**Keywords:** transformations in communications, advances in digital technology, politics, social media, general election, political party leaders, campaign strategies, emerging platforms.

### Resumen

Este estudio aborda las transformaciones en las dinámicas comunicativas impulsadas por los avances digitales y la intersección entre el desarrollo de la tecnología y la esfera política, especialmente en redes sociales. Durante la campaña de las Elecciones Generales de 2023 en España, se analiza, a través de un análisis de contenido, el uso de Facebook, Twitter, Instagram y TikTok por los líderes políticos Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Alberto Núñez Feijóo (PP), Santiago Abascal (Vox) y Yolanda Díaz (Sumar). Se observa un aumento general de seguidores, con mayores incrementos en plataformas emergentes. Los candidatos adoptan estrategias diversas en cuanto a frecuencia y tipo de publicaciones, reflejando adaptaciones contextuales; pero asegurando una presencia sólida en las diferentes redes. En líneas generales, se destaca la complejidad de la comunicación política en el contexto digital, evidenciando la necesidad de estrategias flexibles y adaptativas que consideren las particularidades de cada plataforma, la diversidad de audiencias y la rápida evolución de las dinámicas online.

**Palabras clave:** transformaciones comunicativas, avances digitales, esfera política, redes sociales, elecciones generales, líderes políticos, estrategias de campaña, plataformas emergentes.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The communicative dynamics in the political sphere are currently undergoing remarkable changes (Gilardi et al., 2022; Lipschultz, 2022). Digital advances are taking place at an accelerated pace, and actors in this scenario are trying to adapt their strategies to the innovations of the contemporary digital context (López-García & Pavía, 2019; Mukhametov, 2020; Pérez-Curiel & Domínguez-García, 2021; Schmidhuber et al., 2019). The intersection between technology and the political sphere, centred on social networks and digital platforms, has reconfigured the communicative landscape embraced by political aspirants (Valenzuela et al., 2019). This metamorphosis is particularly evident during electoral campaigns, which have become strategic terrains for the dissemination of messages, images and different types of content authorised by the corresponding platforms (Jensen, 2017; McGregor, 2020; Ross & Bürger, 2014). Social media have transcended their initial function of simply connecting individuals in the virtual sphere and have become a necessary medium for political expression and

interaction (Kalsnes et al., 2017). These platforms provide a relatively democratised space that allows political actors to communicate directly with their audiences, instantly and without relying on traditional media as intermediaries for messages. The inherent immediacy of this channel allows for the creation of a dynamic, dialogic, real-time flow that not only changes public perceptions, but also triggers changes in the political agenda more frequently and quickly (Gilardi et al., 2022; Perloff, 2021; Vásquez-Rizo, 2021).

The implications of this new communicative paradigm are manifold. One of them is the need to adapt and shape narratives according to the platforms or media in which they are deployed (Bimber, 2014; Jungherr et al., 2020). The inherent heterogeneity of the online environment requires versatile communication that adapts to the specificities of the medium's operational dynamics and audience composition (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Larsson, 2020; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). Effectiveness cannot rely on a standardised approach based on an understanding of independent actions, but requires the application of concise, innovative, interconnected and interactive strategies that promote the establishment of genuine connections with message recipients.

Another implication, within which this research can be generally contextualised, is the need to create or deepen metrics of success that are unrelated to electoral support. Traditionally, a limited and very short-term vision of political communication has determined the success or failure of messages based solely on electoral outcomes (Dahlgren, 2005). However, the complexity of the digital sphere requires the evaluation of indicators such as the number of followers, the interactions generated by posts, or the level of audience engagement (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). These variables position themselves as tangible measures of the connection between candidates and users, potentially serving as key aspects in measuring the influence and reach of a political leader (Olof-Larsson, 2023).

This constantly evolving paradigm presents unique challenges and opportunities, where adaptability and understanding of the specificities of each platform are essential to the effectiveness of political communication in the digital age. This exploratory analysis seeks to shed light on these dynamics by examining the digital terrain where politics and technology converge. The Spanish political class places at the centre of its electoral campaigns the need to exponentially increase the level of engagement on social platforms (Túñez & Sixto, 2011), since politics fundamentally aims to connect with citizens, the same objective that social networks pursue, the connection between people (Peytibi, 2011).

Among the most recent communicative research on the use of social networks during electoral periods by the political elite in Spain, we find:

- On the social network Facebook: Abejón-Mendoza & Mayoral-Sánchez, 2017; Calvo et al., 2017; Di Bonito, 2014; Fenoll & Cano-Orón, 2017; Puentes-Rivera et al., 2017.

- On the Twitter social network: Abuín-Vences & García-Rosales, 2020; Capdevila et al., 2022; Gamir-Ríos et al., 2022; Jivkova-Semova et al., 2017; López-Meri, 2017; López-Meri et al., 2017; Marcos-García et al., 2023; Pérez-Curiel & García-Gordillo, 2018; Pérez-Curiel & García-Gordillo, 2020; Ruiz-Del Olmo & Bustos-Díaz, 2020; Suau-Gomila, 2020; Suau-Gomila & Pont-Sorribes, 2019; Zamora-Medina & Zurutuza-Muñoz, 2014.
- On the social network Instagram: López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2018; Moreno-Cabanillas & Castellero-Ostio, 2023; Moreno-Díaz, 2022; Pineda et al., 2020; Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Tirado-García & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021.
- On the social network TikTok: Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Gamir-Ríos & Sánchez-Castillo, 2022; López-Fernández, 2022.
- Some papers include more than one social network, such as Facebook and Twitter: Castellano-Montero, 2016; Bustos-Díaz & Ruiz-Del Olmo, 2021.

As can be observed, the least studied platform, given its recent emergence in the political arena, is TikTok; for Facebook, the publications are less recent, and comparative research between different social platforms is also not very common, which gives great interest to this contribution, which aims to provide a comprehensive view of the communicative situation in the digital medium of the most relevant political actors involved in the recent electoral contests in Spain.

In this context, this study focuses on the analysis of the posts of the four main political leaders on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok during the campaign for the 2023 general elections in Spain. The selection of representatives covering the entire ideological spectrum and the choice of platforms with particularly diverse audiences aim to provide an integral view of the role each plays in the construction of the political image and strategic communication of the candidates. The inclusion of TikTok is justified, despite the fact that only two of the candidates are registered on this platform, because of the need to include platforms that encompass the diversity of users representative of Spanish society. Furthermore, both national and international studies (Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas et al., 2023; Hidalgo-Bustillos et al., 2022) have highlighted the potential of TikTok as an effective tool for political communication.

It is important to note that the evolutionary and comparative perspective throughout the campaign period allows for a global evaluation of the object of study. Beyond the simple comparison of the communicative-electoral behaviour of political actors, it is possible to explore possible differences or similarities in different social media, mostly consumed by audiences of different nature and with different needs.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to analyse how the candidates for the presidency of the Spanish government manage their communication strategies during the campaign for the general elections in July 2023. This will be done through a study of their official profiles on four social media platforms widely used by the Spanish population, including two traditional platforms, Facebook and Twitter, as well as two more novel platforms, Instagram and TikTok.

In particular, this research will focus on the analysis of the similarities and divergences that manifest themselves in the different social platforms. This analysis will include dimensions such as activity, interaction, visibility and themes. To this end, the following specific research objectives (ROs) have been established to help achieve this aim:

- RO1. To explore how Spanish political leaders use social networks to project different communicative situations among their connected audiences.
- RO2. To identify the main theme present in the posts made by politicians during the electoral campaign.
- RO3. Evaluate which candidates have a greater spread and impact.
- RO4. Determine the increase in followers before and after the election campaign for each leader.
- RO5. Compare the leaders' use of different platforms, checking for differences between traditional and newer media.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The focus of this exploratory research is carried out using the technique of quantitative content analysis of the 1,651 posts disseminated by the accounts of Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón (PSOE), Alberto Núñez Feijóo (PP), Santiago Abascal Conde (Vox) and Yolanda Díaz Pérez (Sumar) on different social media platforms during the campaign for the July 2023 general elections (see Table 1). The choice of this technique is based on different research studies on political communication in the digital environment (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017).

The main leaders analysed were the presidential candidates belonging to the parties that, according to pre-election studies conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), obtained an estimated vote share of over 10% throughout the Spanish territory. After examining the profiles, two TikTok accounts were excluded from the analysis, either due to a lack of activity, in the case of the PP leader, or due to constant inactivity throughout the data collection period, in the case of the PSOE candidate.

The selection of these social media platforms for analysis, as opposed to other options, is justified by the fact that they are some of the most widely used social networks in Spain today. In addition, it was taken into account that the chosen platforms include both traditional and established social networks in the Spanish landscape, such as

Facebook and Twitter, as well as more innovative social networks that have experienced a significant increase in users in recent years (Statista, 2023).

**Table 1.** Distribution of sample contributions (Source: own elaboration)

Social Media Profile	Alberto Núñez Feijóo @NunezFeijoo @anunezfeijoo	Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón @sanchezcastejon @sanchezcastejon	Yolanda Díaz Pérez @Yolanda_Diaz_ @diaz_yolanda_ _diaz_yolanda	Santiago Abascal @Santi_ABASCAL @santi_abascal santiabascal_
Facebook	47	60	50	89
Twitter	135	56	261	259
Instagram	76	152	219	187
TikTok	-	-	32	28

The data collection period was from 5 to 25 July 2023, covering both the central period of the electoral campaign and the data collection from two days before the start of the campaign to two days after 23 July, the day of the elections.

In order to carry out a detailed and rigorous analysis of the phenomenon under study, a categorisation model designed exclusively for this research was implemented. Structured analysis formats and checklists were used to collect the data, which included four variables distributed according to the following criteria

- Growth of followers.
- Posts.
- User engagement.
- Main topic of the post.

These four variables allow a comprehensive evaluation of the political communication process through social networks, including the publication, the underlying strategies and the results obtained.

To calculate the engagement of the posts, the main variables that can be obtained from social networks were taken into account, including likes, comments, shares, saves and followers. Depending on the social network, a formula was proposed to determine the level of interaction for each post. The general calculation of engagement corresponds to the following formula (EspartaDigital, 2023):

$$\frac{\text{likes} + \text{comments} + \text{shares}}{\text{followers}} \times 100$$

However, for Instagram posts, since the number of shares is not available, the formula becomes:

$$\frac{\text{likes} + \text{comments}}{\text{followers}} \times 100$$

For TikTok, engagement was calculated without shared content, but with saved data, using the formula

$$\frac{\text{likes} + \text{comments} + \text{saves}}{\text{followers}} \times 100$$

To analyse the data obtained, conventional spreadsheet software was used for simple statistical descriptions, and procedures through the R programming language were used to perform comparisons between groups and statistical procedures that cannot be performed with spreadsheets.

Given the proposed methodological approach and objectives, the following research questions are proposed:

- How do Spanish political leaders use social networks to create and project different communicative situations to their audiences?
- What is the dominant theme in the posts made by politicians during the electoral campaign, and how does it differ between candidates?
- Which candidates achieve greater dissemination and impact through their social media posts during the election campaign?
- What is the increase in the number of followers of each political leader on social networks before and after the election campaign, and what conclusions can be drawn from this data?
- Are there differences in the use of different social media platforms by Spanish political leaders, especially between traditional and new media, and what are the implications of these differences?

The order in which the questions are formulated allows the results and conclusions of the research to be structured.

## 4. RESULTS

The main presidential candidates for the Spanish government have published 1,651 publications on their official social media profiles during the campaign for the 2023 general elections. Of these, 97.7% (n=1,613) contain audiovisual content, such as images or videos.

### 4.1 Followers before and after the campaign

In general, across all social media platforms, political leaders who ran in these general elections saw an increase in the number of followers after the elections. As can be seen in Table 2, there is a significant increase in user interest in the accounts of the presidential candidates, especially in relation to the new presidents of these parties, Feijóo of the PP and Yolanda Díaz as president of the new Sumar party. In the case of newer social media platforms, the growth is much more pronounced, with the leaders of Vox and Sumar choosing the emerging social network TikTok, which has a very young audience, to spread their messages. Yolanda Díaz has seen the biggest increase,

with a 2,589.18% increase on TikTok, as the account was opened three weeks before the election campaign, going from 63,542 followers at the start. Similarly, Abascal increased his followers on this social network by almost 50% of the number he had before the campaign. Pedro Sánchez, on the other hand, only gained 4 followers, and his profile only contained one post from the previous year.

**Table 2.** Number of followers before and after the campaign (Source: own elaboration)

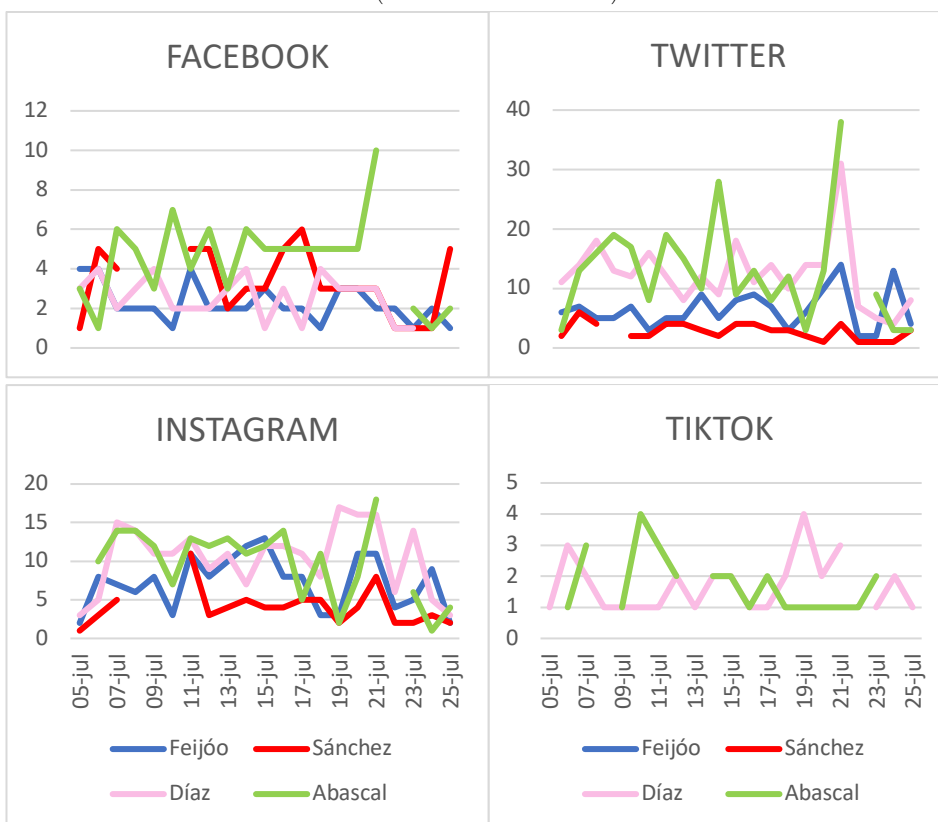
Social Media/ Politician	FACEBOOK			TWITTER			INSTAGRAM			TIKTOK		
	Before	After	%	Before	After	%	Before	After	%	Before	After	%
Feijóo	72k	76k	5,56	161.1k	179.2k	11,24	124k	144k	16,13	-	-	
Sánchez	403k	409k	1,49	1.7m	1.8m	5,88	363k	400k	10,19	20	24	20
Díaz	140k	147k	5	595.2k	621.1k	4,35	263k	337k	28,14	2458	66.1k	2.589
Abascal	537k	547k	1,86	759.5k	774.4k	1,96	854k	885k	3,63	43.1k	64.2k	48,96

#### 4.2 Publications during the election campaign

The distribution of the leaders' publications varies significantly among themselves and across social media platforms (see Figure 1). It is noteworthy that the leaders of Vox and Sumar generate a greater number of publications continuously throughout the campaign, with certain peaks before the Reflection Day, a day when they cannot publish about the party and instead focus on showing their family life or activities with friends. Looking at the PSOE candidate, there is a similar consistency in posting on Instagram and Facebook, with occasional breaks, with slightly more activity on the former platform, as it also includes 24-hour stories. However, on Twitter, a platform where the other candidates increase their frequency of publication, Sánchez continues with the same strategy, even reposting the same posts, both in Facebook and Instagram stories and in the feed. Feijóo maintains a consistent publishing pace, especially on the older social media platforms, with twice as many posts on Twitter compared to the other social media platforms where he has an account. On Instagram, although he posts every day, there is no uniformity in the daily publications; he can publish from 2 to 14 posts, as was the case on 15 July, when 9 were stories and 5 were shared posts on his profile.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of publications on the accounts of political leaders during the election campaign (Source: own elaboration)



### 4.3 Engagement of publications

To calculate engagement, the number of interactions and the number of followers of each politician were taken into account. In this respect, although Pedro Sánchez generally has the highest number of likes, comments, shares and views, if we look at the engagement (see Table 3) of all the leaders, we see that on Facebook Feijóo and Díaz have twice the engagement of the politicians with more experience in general elections. On Twitter, however, the engagement of the PSOE candidate is much higher than that of the others. In the case of Instagram, Abascal's engagement score is quite low (2.68) compared to the other candidates, who range between 5 and 7 points. On the younger social media platforms, engagement is higher, with Yolanda Díaz having the highest engagement compared to the other politicians. Conversely, the PP and PSOE candidates stand out on the older social media platforms.

**Table 3.** Distribution of interactions and engagement on political leaders' accounts (Source: own elaboration)

Social Media/ Politician	Likes/Reactions				Comments				Shares/Saves				Views		Engagement			
	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	TikTok	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	TikTok	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	TikTok	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	TikTok		
Feijóo	1227	1694	8310	-	701	1307	276	-	209	667	174	-	11324	203.684	2,81	0,20	5,96	-
Sánchez	2954	11913	18659	-	1451	2743	1384	-	558	3565	462	-	23280	943.414	1,21	1,01	5,01	-
Díaz	1903	2882	22480	17309	705	440	917	938	432	856	716	727	46188	215.757	2,07	0,67	6,94	28,71
Abascal	4411	3035	23150	8122	835	209	552	278	777	1286	199	435	70912	186.513	1,1	0,58	2,68	13,76

#### 4.4 Relationship between number of publications and engagement

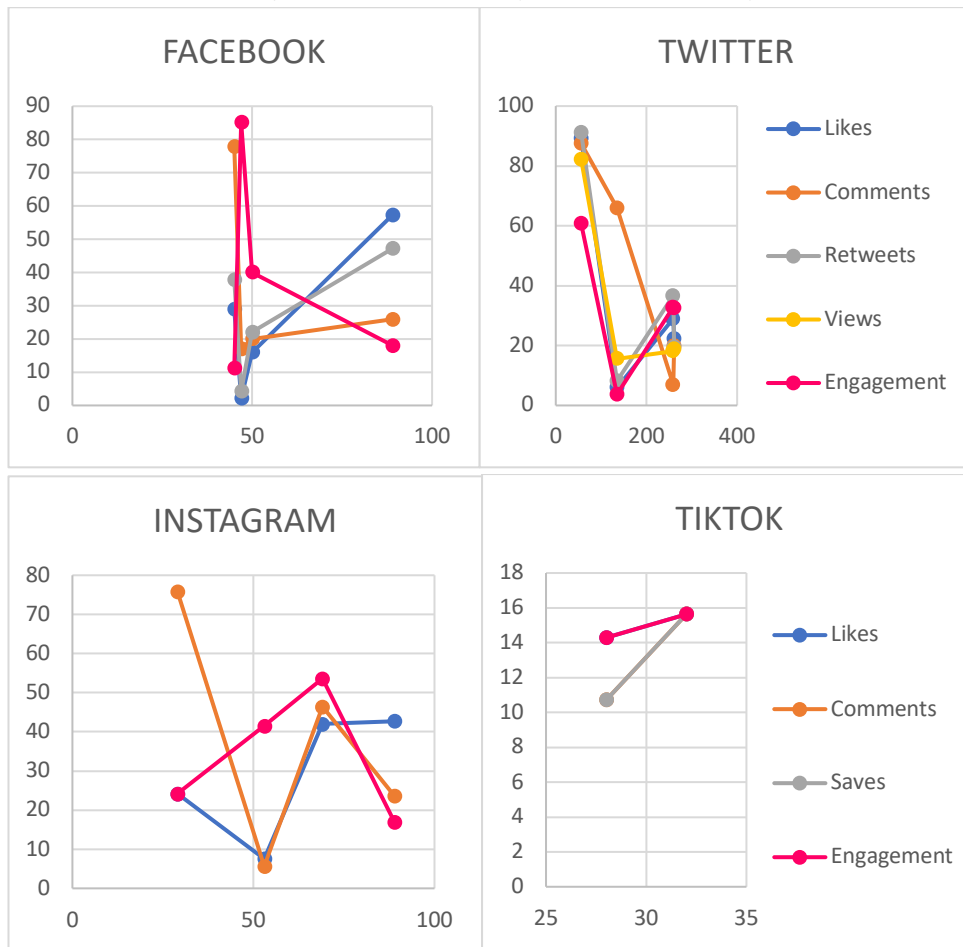
An analysis was carried out to determine whether higher publication rates lead to better interaction, reach and engagement. In this respect, it can be seen that on Facebook, interaction and reach are indeed correlated with the number of publications. In Figure 2, we can see that in most cases there is a correlation between the number of publications and reach (higher number of publications leads to more shares). In the case of Pedro Sánchez, however, the opposite is true. The PSOE leader publishes the least but achieves the highest level of virality. However, engagement does not follow the same pattern. 85.11% of Feijóo's posts exceed the average engagement of all candidates' posts, despite having the second lowest frequency of posts. Sánchez only achieves 11.11% and Díaz, with 50 publications, achieves 40% of posts above the average, while Abascal, who posts the most, only achieves 17.98% of his posts above the average.

Twitter shows a similar pattern to Facebook, with the exception of Sánchez, largely due to his high number of followers. However, comments are generally inversely correlated, with fewer comments as the number of publications increases. In terms of engagement, there is a significant difference compared to Facebook. In this case, the PSOE candidate generates the most engagement, with 60.71% of posts above the average, while Abascal and Díaz, despite publishing the most (n=259 and 261), achieve around half (33%) and Feijóo is well below with only 3.70% and 135 publications.

The case of Instagram is peculiar in terms of likes, where the rule that more publications lead to more likes generally applies, with the exception of Feijóo, which only achieves 7.55% despite being the second most frequent poster. There is no clear pattern for comments. Sánchez leads with the highest percentage despite posting the least (n=29), followed by Díaz with 46.38%, Abascal in third place despite posting the most (n=89) with 23.60%, and finally Feijóo with 5.66% and 53 posts in his feed. Engagement on Instagram correlates with the number of publications, with higher publication rates leading to greater engagement from followers, with the exception of Abascal, whose engagement drops with only 16.85% of posts above the overall average.

Finally, for TikTok, it could be said that higher publication rates lead to higher interaction, reach and engagement, although the difference is almost imperceptible, except for comments and saves.

**Figure 2.** Relationship between interaction, reach and engagement achieved and number of publications on political leaders' accounts (Source: own elaboration)



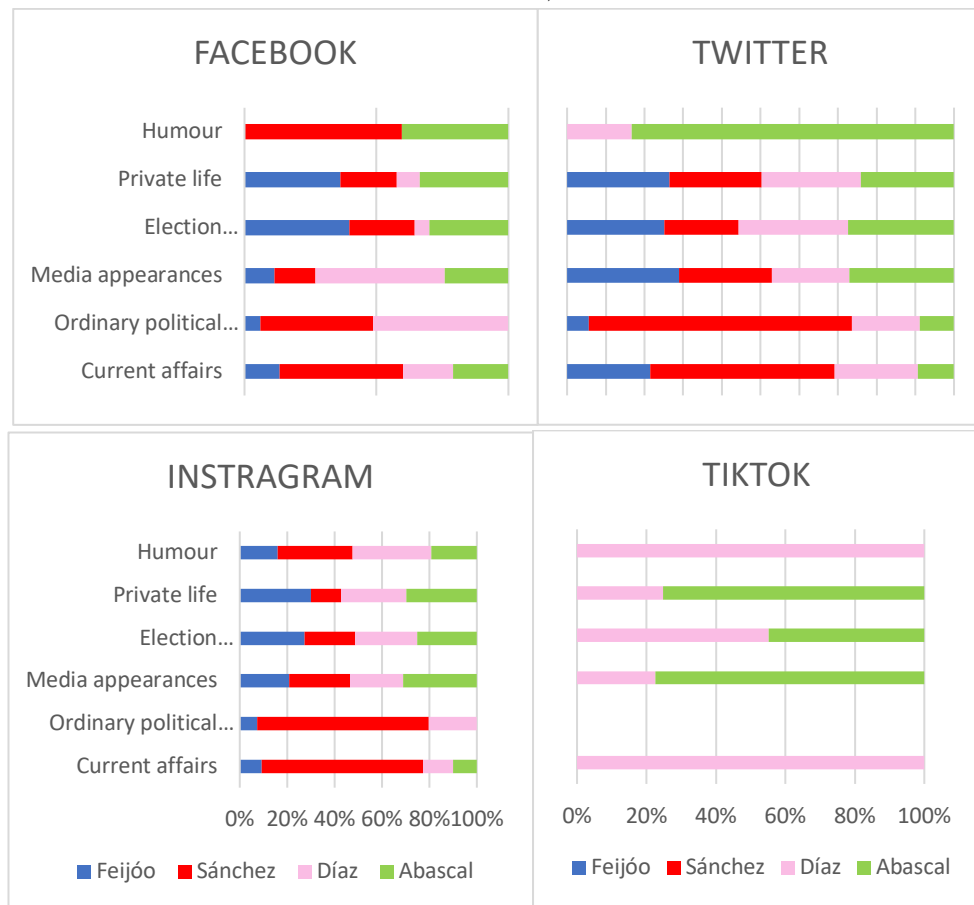
#### 4.5 Main theme of publications

With regard to the main theme of the publications, the majority of the publications of all the candidates are based on the electoral campaign or the promotion of their image, given the time of the analysis. However, each leader has his own particularities (as shown in Figure 3). In addition to the campaign, Feijóo opts for media interventions, especially on Twitter, which accounts for 28.15% (n=38) of his posts. On Instagram, he generates more content about his private life (12.50%, n=19) compared to media interventions. Apart from asking for votes, Pedro Sánchez is the candidate who makes the most posts based on current political events and ordinary political activity, due to his current position as Prime Minister. He also shares content from interviews and/or debates on television media. Díaz, on the other hand, devotes the least amount of posts to image building. As vice-president of the government, she also devotes some of her posts to normal political activity, but after campaign-related posts, she mostly posts about media interventions, especially short videos of confrontations in debates with Abascal. The Vox candidate tends to generate the most media-related posts, criticising the lack of media coverage of the party or its absence in televised debates. In general,

posts related to private life and humour are more common on the younger social media platforms Instagram and TikTok, reaching younger audiences in a more relatable and entertaining way. Examples include Abascal's videos of his stops on the road or at airports, Díaz's videos of going to the cinema or having a drink in a bar, and Sánchez and Feijóo's posts about their hobbies and activities on the day of reflection.

Twitter stands out as a platform used by the candidates not only to ask for votes and promote their image, but also to announce their participation in debates or interviews with the media.

**Figure 3.** Distribution of the main topic of publications on the accounts of political leaders (Source: own elaboration)



## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

During the course of the 2023 general election campaign in Spain, social media played an essential role in the dissemination of political messages, positioning itself as one of the main tools used by candidates to reach their audiences. This phenomenon reinforces the observations of Kalsnes et al. (2017), McGregor (2020) and Ross and Bürger (2014).

Overall, the four candidates analysed experienced an increase in the number of followers on their different social media platforms during the campaign period. On

platforms with a more established track record in political communication, such as Twitter or Facebook, the percentage variations did not show significant changes when comparing the pre- and post-campaign periods. In contrast, newer platforms such as TikTok saw significant increases. In particular, profiles created exclusively to promote ideas during the campaign showed the highest increases, with Yolanda Díaz's account on TikTok standing out. This phenomenon highlights the significant influence of emerging platforms in shaping the follower landscape during crucial political events, in line with what has been pointed out by García-Orosa (2022) or Perloff (2021).

Looking at the number of posts, there were significant differences between the candidates and the different social media platforms. The leaders of Vox and Sumar stood out by maintaining a very high flow of posts, while Feijóo and Sánchez, despite their lower frequency, showed remarkable consistency, especially on Twitter. These differences in the number and frequency of posts reflect the different objectives pursued by each candidate. These different strategic approaches are also clearly visible in the engagement generated by the content published, with the leaders of consolidated parties standing out on mature networks and those of emerging formations on newer platforms. Particularly noteworthy is the high engagement of the Sumar leader, which is in line with the findings of studies such as Ballesteros-Herencia (2022) or Vicente-Fernández and Sonia-Ibáñez (2023), which point to a higher level of interaction and engagement among users of emerging party profiles compared to traditional ones.

The dynamic between the number of posts and interaction shows different patterns depending on the platform studied. With the exception of Instagram, where a clearer relationship between posts and engagement is observed, the link between the two variables is not evident on the other social networks. On some platforms, there are specific patterns where certain variables related to engagement seem to be associated with the posts of certain candidates. However, these findings are not sufficient to draw definitive conclusions about the general relationship between the frequency of posts and public interaction on social media, underlining the complexity of the factors that influence the relationship between published content and audience response in the digital environment. This idea is also present in other studies, such as Farkas and Bene (2021) and Vuckovic (2023).

The thematic orientation of the contributions reflects a clear emphasis on campaign content and the projection of the candidates' image. However, in line with the aforementioned strategic diversity, each candidate presents significant particularities in their communicative approaches. Feijóo and Díaz stand out for their emphasis on the dissemination of media interventions, while Sánchez prioritises current political events and Abascal focuses on criticising the lack of media coverage. The inclusion of aspects related to private life and humour is more pronounced on newer social media

platforms, where there is a desire to establish closer and more entertaining links with a younger audience.

The patterns observed demonstrate the strategic adaptation of candidates to the specific characteristics and expectations of their audiences on different digital platforms. These patterns also reflect the distinctive positioning with which each of them approaches the election. The strategic dynamics differ significantly between those seeking re-election and those running from a position outside of government, resulting in differentiated communicative approaches and themes in their posts.

It is suggested that future research deepen the analysis of the interaction dynamics between candidates and audiences on emerging platforms such as TikTok, which have proven to be particularly relevant in shaping the follower landscape during crucial political events. A particular focus could be on exploring the content strategies used by candidates seeking to influence young audiences. In addition, the relationship between the frequency and nature of posts on mature networks and their influence on public perceptions and voting behaviour could be explored.

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