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Writing graffiti on the Facebook wall: Understanding the online discourse of citizens to politicians during the 2016 Spanish election

Abstract

The goal of this research is to examine what form of e-expression we can find from citizens commenting on the Facebook posts of political party leaders in the context of an election. We employ quantitative content analysis, involving the coding of styles of e-expression and counting their occurrences, to determine how politician's use Facebook, the level of citizen comments, their tone, content, and style of communication, whether comments are monologic or dialogic and the structure of dialogic interactions between citizens. The data is drawn from comments made to a sample of posts by Mariano Rajoy, incumbent Prime Minister and leader of the Popular Party, and Pablo Iglesias, leader of the new insurgent Podemos party during the 2016 Spanish general election campaign. We conceptualise citizen comments as e-expression a means for having a voice, being heard and, potentially at least, joining debates with others. The results of this research show that dynamics on Facebook pages offer an opportunity for understanding wider political dynamics in a society. It is suggested that both exogenous macro-political and endogenous micro-platform factors shape the patterns of discourse found on the social media pages of these leaders and that studying these platforms can indicate trends in wider society and how social media can accentuate attitudes towards political platforms and leaders.

Keywords
Political discourse, e-expression, interactivity, Facebook, Spanish election campaigns, citizen conversation.

1. Introduction

Political candidates, elected representatives, party leaders and parties have increasingly colonised social media platforms, such as Facebook, as a means of reaching greater numbers of citizens. A study on political strategists in twelve EU member states showed it was perceived as the third most important medium, behind television and face-to-face (Lilleker et al., 2014). Social media provides a space for elected

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representatives, party leaders and candidates to reach a more diverse audience than traditional media, deliver a brand image and 'frame' their campaign identity and character (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Lin, 2016). For candidates or party leaders, personalizing their brand is a key strategy (Karlsen, 2011; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). Political actors increasingly use social media as a space for personal branding, emphasising their ordinariness and understanding of the average man and women in their constituency (Enli, 2015). Parties and political actors also seek to activate their followers and encourage them to like and share their content in order that campaign messages are extended through social networks. Social media thus become a means to directly convey messages and develop routine contact with an attentive public (Straus et al., 2013), as well as having their messages mediated through the networks of their followers. Hence, one strategic use of social media, in particular Facebook is, in the terminology of Norris and Curtice (2008), to preach 'through' the converted. However, a by-product of using the social media environment for political communication is that platforms also provide a space where users can comment directly to posts. If comments consist of simple, supportive statements they meet campaigners' objectives, however the loss of control can equally lead to critique or attack (Schwartz, 2015). The fact that user comments rarely get a response from the host suggests these sites are rarely monitored or politicians avoid joining debates with their social media followers (Vergeer et al. 2011).

The lack of interactivity suggests most political actors use social media purely for self-promotion (Ceron & Curini, 2016). Whether representatives between elections (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2013; Ross et al., 2015), candidates for election (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Bene, 2016) or party leaders (Larsson & Ihlen, 2015) communication takes the form of a promotional monologue, only Danish politicians have been found to engage with their online followers (Sørensen, 2016). In a few cases, short conversations do take place, and it is argued that these can decrease the psychological distance between the politician and the potential voter (Vergeer et al. 2011). Yet despite politician's social media usage being monologic and interaction with the host being rare, using social media still involves losing control of the message (Vaccari, 2009). Facebook in particular is a site for public interaction about politics (Utz, 2009) and politicians' pages are used to support and attack the host, display cynicism (Hanson et al., 2010), discuss the campaign, policy and broader public affairs leading it to be a site of uncontrolled public engagement (Schwartz, 2015). Hence, a politician's Facebook profile can become a space for debate, contestation and protest the nature of which offers interesting insights into the dynamics of usage of such spaces as well, we suggest, as broader socio-political attitudinal trends.

Our project focuses on how users use the comments facility on Facebook in the context of the 2016 Spanish election and when corresponding with party leaders. Spain is an interesting case study firstly due to innovations in communication, through a YouTube video Mariano Rajoy, the leader of the Spanish Popular Party, asked citizens to give their opinions on many of the salient issues surrounding the 2011 campaign. This marked an important breakthrough in the use of the internet for political campaigning by the Spanish parties (Cardenal, 2013: 84). Secondly, the citizen initiated campaigns that led to the formation firstly of the 15M movement and then the Podemos party demonstrate a vibrant and contested political environment online. Before presenting our methodology and data, the paper discusses how we might understand the function of Facebook pages as third spaces, spaces that permit e-expression and how we can map the structure of user comments.

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2. Third spaces and e-expression

Wright describes online platforms as being virtual third spaces, a space where citizens can interact independently of their demographics and discuss important issues of the day. Studies have shown a number of platforms can be used for this purpose (Graham et al., 2015). All spaces which allow citizens to contribute content have the properties that constitute a third space, a place where citizens can meet unhindered by socio-political barriers (Wright, 2012); the question however is whether they have the character of a third space, whether they are used for discursive interaction as opposed to graffiti-style simplistic demonstrations of support or opposition (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009).

We adopt the more inclusive term e-expression (Gibson et al., 2015) to discuss and understand the myriad ways citizens use commenting facilities, from asking questions and starting conversations to short expressions of support or opposition. Spaces which facilitate e-expression are argued to be empowering (Shirky, 2011), they place the individual user in control, although tending to attract more egocentric users: who are suggested to be unrepresentative, but whose activity is sustained by their social networks and the interactions they receive as a result of the style and content of their comments (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). However, this is set in a wider context of behavioural repertoires which can be viewed as a form of political engagement (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Those Strauss et al. (2013) term the attentive publics are increasingly targeted by a range of political actors in order to extend their reach, mobilise potential supporters, and gain data (Karlsen, 2011; Zittel, 2009). For more marginalised political voices, social media also represent a means of bypassing the gatekeepers of traditional media outlets (Lin, 2016). The ability to befriend a political leader, candidate or party can be empowering in itself, as can venting ones feelings and opinions at a member of the political elite (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011).

As politics becomes more fluid, and the centres of influence more diffuse, we find what Beck (1997) termed *sub-politics* emerging involving new forms of participation and expression. Parties that had become hollowed out with the decline of mass membership can find themselves rejuvenated by an active online support base (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016) resembling Margetts' (2016) cyber-party model blurring the line between member and activist in ways of the users' choosing (Heaney & Rojas, 2015). The important point here is that the manner in which cyber-party activists behave is contingent on their feelings towards the party, the socio-political environment and the individual page host. Hence, when expressing their views on social media, performing acts of e-expression, they are as likely to express their personal concerns and feelings as perform supportive tasks under the guidance of a host (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010). E-expressive engagement represents an identity and lifestyle choice (Bennett, 1998), performed by those described as *everyday makers* (Bang & Sørensen, 1999) or the *engaged citizenship* (Dalton, 2015). Citizens engage in looser, more flexible, and less "dutiful" engagement repertoires of behaviour (Tormey 2015; Wells 2015) including sporadic engagement with "citizen-initiated campaigning" revolving around "community building, getting out the vote, generating resources and message production" (Gibson 2015: 187). The communities and networks formed offer *dual identifications*: where social movement activism can be consistent with or run counter to partisan campaigning (Heaney & Rojas, 2015) whilst also shaping the form e-expression takes.

Optimists have pointed to the potential for citizens to engage and 'play a role in the development of new democratic politics' (Dahlgren, 2005: 160). Some users certainly suggest a desire to both express views and enter into lively and pluralist current affairs debates (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). E-expressive contributions can range from highly informed explanations regarding a stance towards an issue to a simple statement that has the

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characteristics of online graffiti (Jackson & Lilleker, 2007). However the style and level of engagement is determined by the atmosphere within the comments spaces (Lee & Jang, 2010), cynicism can breed cynicism and while negativity can close down conversations more developed points can sustain a debate (Sundar et al., 2003). Hence partisan profiles can often deliver the least pluralist discussion as users tend to seek dissonance reduction and identity maintenance (e.g., Hogg, 2007; Kahan, 2013; Munro et al., 2002). These environments thus tend to be echo chambers, dominated by those with positive attitudes toward the host (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008), so appearing to be virtual cheerleaders. Opponents might also post negative comments, trolling a candidate without interacting with other users. In these cases language can be highly uncivil, towards the political actor or to other users. If trolling becomes dominant then the echo chamber can develop a negative tone (Barberá et al., 2015), furthermore as the politically cynical or disenfranchised may be more likely to visit the spaces of prominent politicians to express their feelings a generally cynical mood can emerge (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010, p. 46). Hence, while expressing negative feelings can be cathartic (Neubaum et al., 2014), such behaviour has a depressive impact on the tone and levels of engagement. Hence e-expressive behaviour may be governed by exogenous and endogenous factors (Lilleker & Bonacci, 2017); times of socio-economic and political turmoil, crisis and uncertainty may lead to non-partisan activism appearing within partisan hosted spaces (Hanson et al., 2010; Ems, 2014). But factors endogenous to a hosted space, such as the behaviour of other users, in terms of the style and content of interaction, can lead to the formation of communicative norms so resembling a supportive echo-chamber (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008), or a site of lively and confrontational debate (Baek et al., 2012). Social media users may also communicate using more emotional language in order to gain a reaction (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013) given that gaining likes or further responses for their comments would appear one source of motivation for e-expressive behaviour (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Hence a range of dynamics likely influences the form of user e-expressions.

Spanish politics has seen a long period of upheaval, in particular, since experiencing some of the more profound consequences of the global economic crisis. The occupation of public spaces by the 15M Movement and emergence of the Indignados and subsequently Podemos as a party placed the importance of social media into the spotlight. Yet more traditional Spanish parties have long flirted in the world of social media campaigning (Zamora-Media & Zurutuza-Muñoz, 2014). In fact, it was "The video of Mariano Rajoy, the leader of the Spanish Popular Party, asking citizens to give their opinions on many salient issues of the campaign that marked an important breakthrough in the use of the internet for political campaigning by the Spanish parties" (Cardenal, 2013: 84). However, it is the campaigns of the outsiders that have been seen as the most notable development in Spanish politics (Castells, 2015; Casero et al., 2016; Orriols & Cordero, 2016; López García, 2016; Casero et al., 2017). Beyond Castells' accounts of 15M from a cyber-optimist perspective, studies of the Spanish political social media environment have focused on analysis of discursive practices from a deliberative democracy perspective. More deliberation and contestation was found on the pages of prominent candidates standing for larger parties, smaller party candidates were more likely to gain a supportive echo chamber (Valera-Ordaz, 2017). Aside from divisions along the lines of party size, discourse differences were equally found along ideological lines. Spanish right-wing parties gained an audience which reinforced their liberal-individualist ideology; leftist parties meanwhile found a more communitarian dialogue among their followership (Valera-Ordaz, 2012). These data suggest differences in the behaviour of followers of established and more marginalised, outsider parties as well as those on opposing sides of the political spectrum (Zurutuza-Muñoz, 2018). Yet other factors might also determine the nature of discourse, particularly during an election campaign. Socio-economic and political factors are like to shape attitudes towards

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political candidates, similarly the dynamics of a specific contest will determine the nature of the campaign and citizen attitudes. Social media pages can also develop their own communicative dynamics. Hence, our analysis seeks to explore the trends across the pages created by two very different Spanish party leaders: the right wing Popular Party leader and incumbent Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and the insurgent leftist Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias. The reasons why these two candidates have been selected as case study for this research project are explained and justified in the methodology section. The analysis allows us to determine how Facebook users respond to those leaders and what factors might determine the similarities and differences in how users respond to leaders' posts.

3. Objectives and methodology

Following the mapping of the activities of the leaders, our research focuses on four research questions (RQs). RQ1, *what forms of user e-expression can be found (focusing on the tone, civility and complexity) on the profile pages of the selected Spanish political party leaders.* Following on from exploring the e-expression dynamics, we move on to exploring the conversational discourse in RQ2. *Do conversations take place between users and, if so, what factors appear to drive the development of conversations.* Drawing on the notion that e-expression can be viewed as a representation of public interest and latent trends in public opinion, RQ3 enquires about *the main topics of user comments, whether they relate to the original post, and/or other user's comments.* E-expression has also been suggested to represent an indication of the perceived proximity between the social network and the political actor (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Greater numbers of comments may demonstrate greater interest, closeness and support. RQ4 examines *how commenters address the host, the level of formality and familiarity, and the broader subject matter and tone that accompanies the address.* The discussion of the findings allows an exploration of the factors that may underpin the patterns of discourse we find to be visible.

The 2016 Spanish parliamentary election campaign took place 10-26 June, Rajoy was the favourite to retain the premiership, and however the composition of Parliament was unknown due to the emergence of new left and right wing populist parties (Podemos and Ciudadanos). There was speculation and uncertainty given the inability of members of Parliament to form coalitions and reach an agreement to appoint a new Prime Minister after the December 2015 election, barely half a year before.

The result of the previous legislative election, held on 20 December 2015, undermined the usual bipartisanship voting pattern, polarizing society and fragmenting Parliament. The rules of the political scene changed completely because citizens demanded, at the ballot box, a change in the system in the context of the crisis. The Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE), both governing alternately in Spain since early 80s, lost their hegemony as the new, radical political parties Podemos and Ciudadanos made their way into the Parliament. The eleventh democratic term witnessed the most fragmented Parliament ever: PP obtained 130 seats; PSOE, 90; Podemos (including all the different political brands under which they stood in this election), 69; and Ciudadanos, 40. This meant no clear majority for any party, and the obligation to reach agreements in order to form a Government. After several months of unsuccessful attempts to name a new Prime Minister, fresh elections were called in an attempt to break the political stalemate. The candidates were the same: Mariano Rajoy (PP), Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Pablo Iglesias (Unidos Podemos), and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos), this created the perception of the contest being a second round of the 2015 election, but for two main differences that exerted a determinant influence over the campaign.

Firstly, Podemos formed an electoral coalition with Izquierda Unida (both the most extreme left-wing parties on the Spanish ideological spectrum), to form Unidos Podemos.

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Pablo Iglesias was appointed the official prime-ministerial candidate, setting aside Izquierda Unida's leader, Alberto Garzón, who performed a secondary role during the campaign. Secondly, Pedro Sánchez, PSOE's candidate, was the only one who underwent the investiture procedure during the incomplete term, but could not gain support in Parliament to hang on to the premiership. His political defeat weakened the socialists' candidacy for the 2016 elections, and it unleashed an internal leadership crisis.

Because of the political landscape as described, the two political parties that mainly set the electoral agenda were PP and Podemos, those on the opposing sides of the political spectrum. This proves that the rules of the political game had changed completely after the 2015 election. They established diametrically opposite discursive axes during the campaign, polarizing voters, they commanded the widest representation in the Parliament, and had the strongest proven capacity to gain votes, respectively (Zurutuza-Muñoz, 2018). These represent most different cases in terms of their careers, seniority in politics and ideology as well (Zugasti & Pérez, 2016). Rajoy and Iglesias also played the leading roles in the electoral campaign: even news media defined the electoral contest as a battle between the two[1]. This context of ideological and personalized polarization constitutes a suitable ground to analyze if citizens used the potential offered by social media to interact and engage in dialogic e-expression or created echo chambers around simplistic graffiti-style expressive behavior.

Hence, there was much to play for between the party leaders amid high civic interest in the election contest. A key question is how this shaped the atmosphere on social media. In order to code the language and patterns of discourse found within the comments of users towards party leaders we purposively selected six posts which earned intensive discussion. Three posts were extracted from the pages hosted by Mariano Rajoy (leader of the Peoples' Party since 2004 and Prime Minister of Spain since 2011) and Pablo Iglesias (academic and leader of the newly formed Podemos party since 2014).

The three posts were extracted from a corpus of posts formed by all the posts published by both candidates in their Facebook pages during the electoral campaign. These were coded in terms of their content as focusing on either policy proposals, a post criticising an opponent's policy or platform or a personal statement or comment. The average number of comments received by each politician for each of these three topics was calculated as well. The sample for each candidate comprised the three most representative posts of each topic in terms of proximity in the number of comments to that of the average. The selected posts are as follows:

Rajoy's posts: "The #26J Spanish citizens choose between two models for #Spain: a moderate government or an extremist and radical one. We have the opportunity to take a formidable step forward by creating 500.000 new jobs every year, or witness the failure of economic recovery. Think about it and go #Infavour" (policy proposal); "Those who now want to sort things out in the country in 24 hours, where were they 4 year ago? They didn't make a single proposal. And what are Spanish citizens deciding on the #26J? Go back to the past or carry on #Infavour. I count on all of you, I'm in good shape and have an excellent team. #VotePP" (criticism), "Have you ever been to Torrevieja? I share with you a video of my morning walk along the maritime promenade in this outstanding place. We carry on #Infavour" (personal comment).

Iglesias' posts: "These 177 economists have issued a manifesto asking for the end of austerity policies. We want to thank them for their compromise" (policy proposal); "This Sunday #Don'tStayAtHome. It's a historic day and families have to vote: grandchildren

[1] Díez, A., Manetto, F. and Casqueiro, J.: El duelo de 'segunda vuelta' entre Rajoy e Iglesias margina al PSOE (The 'second round' duel between Rajoy and Iglesias marginalises PSOE). In elpais.es (11/05/2016). Retrieved on the 7th of November, 2017, from this URL: https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2016/05/10/actualidad/1462905768_568969.html

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together with their grandparents. Unid❤s Podemos" (criticism: it includes a satirical video criticizing Partido Popular); "So hard to achieve, mother of god… #GoSpain" (personal comment).

All the comments made to these six posts were analysed. The corpus of the sample was 4422 individual comments (990 for Rajoy and 3432 for Iglesias). The comments were hand-coded quantitatively by two coders. A coding sheet was drawn up based on previous literature and coders then provided an assessment of each comment where 1 represented the presence of an item (or 1, 2, 3 where there are multiple items) and 0 its absence. A random sample of 300 comments was analysed and the Cohen's Kappa inter-coder reliability coefficient reported an average agreement of 0.914 among all the variables on the coding sheer.

These variables are as follows: what the comments responded to (the post directly, another root comment [one responding directly to the post] or a second-level user comment or a combination); the topic ((policy, democratic regeneration, events or the expression of opinion – each coded individually by topic)) and if it was the same as that of the post or the root comment being responded to; the framing of the comments (strategic, discussing the political dimensions and implications; thematic, referring to policy or a broad area of discussion; or conflictual, speaking in a negative way towards the host or other commenters); the supportive or critical tone; whether other politicians were mentioned and the attitude towards them; the form of dialogue; the type of evidence used to back up a statement, if present; whether comments were calls to action designed to mobilise users; the complexity (shallow, single line comments – often supportive or very negative; neutral, more than a single line; or complex, well-developed argumentation), the level of formality (Mr Prime Minister to Rajoy, or Professor/Mr Iglesias, the respectful Spanish term Usted, the first name or a derogatory name); and the level of civility (using insulting language; a humorous tone or evidencing polarised manicheist argumentation.

The data permitted cross-tabulation and correlation tests to understand how different combinations of patterns could be found across the corpus as well as those relating to posts of specific politicians and their posting strategies. The results are presented following a short overview of the strategies of each of the party leaders.

4. Results

4.1. Basic data on politician's use of Facebook

Spanish political party leaders are not the most active posters on Facebook, Rajoy and Iglesias are therefore average for the contest. Their use of visuals was almost equal, as was the balance between positive and negative posts. Rajoy's posts tended to be thematic and focus on strategy with little use of the conflictual frame, Iglesias communicated almost entirely in a thematic way, driven by his social issue agenda. Iglesias was also slightly more information-driven. Rajoy's posts evidence a more active mobilisation and engagement strategy however. Therefore, despite the paucity of posts, the pages were clearly campaigning-oriented, offering reasonably similar experiences for followers. Where the pages differed were their priorities, Rajoy was far more likely to make policy proposals, be critical and personalise his page; Iglesias developed a more thematic, issue-based approach (the raw numbers can be found in Table 1).

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Table 1. Party leader posting strategy during the 10-26 July 2016

Content	Mariano Rajoy	Pablo Iglesias
Overall number of posts	37	36
Photos or video included	37	31
Positive tone	16	21
Negative tone	6	6
Strategic	12	4
Thematic	16	28
Conflictual	8	3
Informative	23	28
Mobilising	22	16
Inviting engagement	34	20
Proposing policy	11	2
Critical	18	4
Personalised	7	3

4.2. Basic structure of comments

Iglesias' posts received over three times the number of comments of those of Rajoy, 3432 versus 990 suggesting this was a more vibrant environment. There is no clear pattern in terms of number of comments by post content: Rajoy's policy post received 263 comments, Iglesias' 1799; Rajoy's negative post 353 comments, Iglesias' 801; Rajoy's personal post 374, Iglesias' 832. Policy seemed not to generate much interest among Rajoy's followership, while Iglesias' followers showed greater interest in policy, but the disparity in overall numbers is the main observation. There is also an important disparity in terms of patterns of interaction. Users mainly made comments directly to the post, these are root comments, and there were then responses to root comments and responses to these second level comments, the latter categories showing there was dialogue among users. As expected due to the greater number of comments, there are exponentially more root comments made on Iglesias' posts than those of Rajoy; equally, on Rajoy's page there are less responses to root comments and again less comments at the second level. However, on Iglesias' page we find a lower than expected number of users responded to root comments, and a higher number respond at the second level. This fact suggests that intense discussions were taking place, potentially on topics of the users' own choosing, taking place beneath the posts of Pablo Iglesias. In contrast with Rajoy, who received more graffiti style root comments that encouraged and so received few responses, these amounted to 10.8% of all comments. Iglesias meanwhile had few root comments receive no reply and even those comments gained further responses.

Table 2. User interactivity patterns across Spanish party leader pages

Mariano Rajoy		
Root comment	Response to root comment	Response to second level comment
491	284	81
1331	440	841
Pablo Iglesias		

In terms of the content of comments and the extent to which they were on the same topic as posts, root comments or second level comments we firstly focus on the topics. A large number of all comments were expressions of opinion (Rajoy 23.1%, Iglesias 16.3%),

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while for Rajoy most comments simply showed support (31.2%), or were campaign related comments (14.6%), there was then discussion of the economic crisis (10.1%), general policy issues (3.3%) and democratic regeneration (5.7%). Iglesias' followers also showed support (21.6%), but to a lesser degree and many posted insults (14%) and more again criticisms (24.9%), the campaign featured (9.2%) and then comments focused on the economy (5.8%), democratic regeneration (3.4%) and then other policy areas. Considering that anti-corruption issues, labelled democratic regeneration, was a core theme of the Podemos campaign it is surprising this issue was a low priority, discussed in only 117 comments. The patterns here predominate across root comments, responses to the root comments and second level commenting behaviour. But the main finding is that most comments were simple expressions of opinion (including simple messages of support or criticism). These forms of e-expression are most prominent among comments on Iglesias' posts but equally among the most prominent on Rajoy's posts. Therefore, responding to RQ1, we find commenters use Facebook's affordances for e-expression to largely make simplistic comments of criticism or support, which resembles graffiti on these leaders' walls. The followers of neither leader used the pages to debate policy in great numbers, in fact more comments talked about the campaign (Rajoy 145, 14.6%; Iglesias 316, 9.2%) than the economic crisis (Rajoy 100, 10.1%; Iglesias 200, 5.8%) despite this issue being predominant in the campaign with a polarised debate on austerity measures dominating the election agenda. It would therefore appear party leaders' Facebook pages are used mostly for the simplest forms of e-expression.

4.3. Tone, civility and complexity of comments

One might expect the pattern of comments to reflect the fact that party leader's pages are echo chambers, populated by their supporters who in turn populate comment spaces with simple messages of support. Firstly, therefore we coded whether comments, independent of the topic, contained any expressions of support or criticism and of whom. The data is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Support/criticism of hosts and opponents on comments on party leader posts

	Mariano Rajoy	**Pablo Iglesias**
Support for host/party	360 (36.4%)	867 (25.3%)
Criticism of host/party	220 (22.2%)	820 (23.9%)
Support for host + criticism of opponent	153 (15.5%)	275 (8%)
Criticism of host + support for opponent	12 (1.2%)	22 (0.6%)
Support opponent only	4 (0.4%)	23 (0.7%)
Criticise opponent only	29 (2.9%)	313 (9.1%)

The data shows these sites were by no means echo chambers. Levels of support and criticism shown for the host party leader were of similar levels and while there are clearly many that criticised opponents, some while supporting the host, almost a quarter of all comments were critical of the host to some extent. Where opponents were mentioned, followers of Rajoy targeted the PSOE and Podemos; Iglesias' followers also targeted the PSOE as well as Rajoy's People's Party. Interestingly the leaders were seldom named on the pages of their opponents, so attacks were not personalised but rather levelled at the alternative narrative of government. Podemos supporters were keen to level attacks against all other parties and politicians on Iglesias' page.

The critical tone which party leaders faced was part of a broader negative atmosphere. When Rajoy's followers addressed other users there was a split between neutral comments

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(46%) and those adopting a more critical tone (45.6%). Iglesias' followers, in contrast, adopted a mainly critical tone when addressing each other, 60.2% of comments were critical compared to 17% that were supportive and 16.9% which were coded as neutral. These data map well to the framing of comments. 58.1% of comments from Rajoy's followers adopted a conflict frame (33.6% thematic and 8.3% strategic), similarly 55.6% of Iglesias' followers adopted the conflict frame, 37.2% Thematic and only 7.2% strategic. The tone was affected somewhat by the nature of the post. Rajoy's negative post elicited strong support (40.8% of the 353 comments), but the critical tone was mirrored in 58.5% of comments and 57.5% adopted an overall conflict frame. Rajoy's policy post got a more balanced response (50.9% neutral tone, 38.4% critical tone; although the conflict frame predominated in 67.5% of the 263 comments). The personal post elicited a slightly more neutral but largely balanced pattern of responses (neutral 49%, critical 43.3%) but greater balance in the frame of the comments (conflict frame 52.5%, thematic frame 44.9% of 374 comments). Therefore, it would seem that to an extent the followers responded to the negativity in Rajoy's post while framing others within the polarisation of the contest when adopting a conflict frame. Iglesias had an even more mixed response in comments. His policy post received a critical tone in 70.1% of the 1799 comments despite the comments being 58% thematic and 36.8% explicitly critical. The negative post had an even more dramatic impact on the tone and frame of comments, a critical tone was adopted in 52% of comments and 80.7% were conflict framed.

But attracting criticism seemed particular to Iglesias. His personal post, the message 'Vamos [Go] España' to the national football team received 832 comments of which 66.1% were critical in tone and all adopted the conflict frame. While 34% of comments on his personal post were supportive of him (25.4% on his negative post and 14.8% on his policy post), it seems his page attracted a more negative tone and commenting was contextualised in the conflict endemic to the campaign. The critical tone was not purely levelled at Iglesias. Commenters who adopted a critical tone towards other users did also show support for Iglesias, suggesting 14.1% of critical comment were made in defence of Iglesias. This trend was also apparent in 28.1% of comments to Rajoy's posts. However, although the tone was critical and conflict framed, the atmosphere was civil on the majority of posts (Rajoy 98.4%, Iglesias 87.1%) and while there were a number of insults levelled at host or other users (Rajoy 4.3%, Iglesias 18.8%) many were polite or veiled insults a small number, both supporting or criticising Iglesias, proved quite uncivic. Humour was used very rarely, only 4.1% of comments to Rajoy and 7% to Iglesias contained satirical or jokey language. More predominant in terms of promoting a negative atmosphere, and linking to the conflict frame was the manicheist, good versus evil, language with 19.6% of comments to Rajoy and 7.3% to Iglesias reflecting the polarized, zero-sum atmosphere of the contest. Hence data partially answering RQ2 highlights similarities and differences between user comments to each prime ministerial candidate suggesting the influence of partisan and communicative dynamics on commenting.

4.4. Monologue, depth and the structure of dialogic interactions

As noted, there were differing commenting structures, Iglesias' posts in particular earned extensive user-to-user interactivity although some did take the form of arguments and insults. Firstly, we note that the majority of comments were simply expressions of personal opinion (Rajoy 75%, Iglesias 94.1%). However, some comments did include evidence, 17.8% of comments on Rajoy's posts (176 comments) included some claim to fact for reinforcement. The percentage of comments on Iglesias' posts including evidence is lower (5.2%) but in number almost equal at 179.

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Despite social media platforms offering the opportunity to ask the host or other users' questions, only 6.1% of comments on Rajoy's posts and 5.5% on Iglesias' posts took up that opportunity. 28.7% of Rajoy's followers answered questions, only 5 (0.2%) of Iglesias' followers did this. While asking or answering questions may not be appropriate in the heat of a campaign, at least in the view of candidates, followers similarly did not enter into making calls for action to support the leader's campaign. Only 37 (3.6%) comments to Rajoy's posts attempted to mobilise others, 202 (0.7%) of comments to Iglesias' posts.

The focus of comments largely was the candidate themselves, 64.7% of comments on Rajoy's posts, 41.3% of comments to Iglesias. Despite the polarised atmosphere of the contest, ideology did not feature highly (Rajoy 2.3%, Iglesias 6.7%). Rather, a significant amount of comment and opinion focused upon issues and policies (Rajoy 13.5%, Iglesias 24.9%). The fact that a quarter of comments on Iglesias' posts were issue focused suggests, he encouraged a degree of debate and division due to his populist yet controversial positions. Hence again we find both similarities and contrasts in responding to RQ2 but data answering RQ3 demonstrates users largely use social media opportunities for e-expression to say what they want about the issues important to them and so the hosts do not lead the agenda on their profile pages.

4.5. Proximity and Familiarity

Finally, we focused on how the leaders were addressed if at all by their followers. On the whole Rajoy was referred to using formal language such as using Mr, the Spanish formal term of respect 'Usted' or by his title of Prime Minister (66.2%). There is a marked contrast with Iglesias, perhaps reflecting his outsider, man of the people status, lacking of any formal elected status beyond the European parliament. We find that 24.3% simply refer to Iglesias as 'you', 38.9% as simply Pablo, while 11.7% use a derogatory term. Only 3.7% use formality, suggesting to some extent familiarity and closer proximity but also a lack of respect. In answering RQ4 we thus find a sharp contrast between user attitudes to the two leaders.

4.6. Campaign, candidate or social media dynamics

Our data offers some indications regarding how party leaders' Facebook pages are used by their followers as well as how they reflect the specific dynamics of a contest and the differences between specific leaders. One of the more interesting findings is that neither party leader enjoyed a purely supportive following on Facebook; instead, user comments reflected a diversity of opinion on the right course for the Spanish nation on the pages of both leaders independent of the subject or form of the post of the leader. Thus, focusing purely on the comments that expressed support or criticism, including combinations of support/criticism for the host and an opponent allows us to see whether there are patterns between variables which explain the occurrence of demonstrations of support or criticism (Table 4).

Comments supportive of Rajoy are evenly spread across strategic, thematic and conflict framed posts, so negativity did not deter supportive comments significantly. A conflict frame was most likely to predict users making comments in support of the host while criticising an opponent, in evidence we find the conflict frame led to 107 comments (85.6% in this category) making a comparative case for supporting Rajoy. Support is shown when being neutral or critical towards other users, suggesting users defend the host from criticism made by other users. This may also be evidenced in the answering of questions, which was most likely to occur in comments supporting the host while also criticising an opponent. As with many posts, supportive comments tend to be candidate-centred, shallow expressions of opinion. The exception being the comparative posts, these are more likely to less shallow and include evidence and complex argumentation. The latter are also more

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likely to be manicheist, showing the campaign dynamics influence the patterns of commenting on Facebook.

Criticisms of Rajoy were mostly thematic or conflict framed and there is an indication that, like supporters, critics expressed hostility to other users who were supportive of the host. Critics answered, but also asked questions, and a small number answered questions by criticising the host while promoting an opponent. Critical commenters are more likely to provide evidence than supporters, and there is a stronger tendency for criticism to be issue-centred despite the predominance of a candidate-centred focus for all comments. Criticism is less likely to be shallow, though it retains the character of opinion. Criticisms were also slightly more likely to include an insult, be funny, and like supportive comments adopted a manicheist character. So, again, it seems the broader nature of the campaign is reflected on Rajoy's page.

Support for Iglesias features in thematic or conflict framed posts, with the latter predominantly used when supporting Iglesias and criticising an opponent. As with Rajoy, the fact that supporting Iglesias coincides with criticising other users suggests argument taking place and his supporters attacking those who expressed criticism. While the patterns are similar across most variables, notable is the greater level of evidence used by Iglesias' critics. There is also a lot of issue-centred criticism, although as with Rajoy candidate-centred criticism is dominant. There is also greater depth of evidence in comments when followers compare Iglesias with opponents, independent of whether they support or criticise him when comparing his stance to others. Iglesias' comments also evidence more insulting language, when criticising him alone as well as in comparison to an opponent. Insults also occur when followers are showing support for him while criticising an opponent. Humour is also used in a small number of critical posts while a manicheist dialogue is strongly evident in comparative arguments whether supporting or criticising Iglesias. Therefore, while there are patterns of behaviour consistent with the dynamics of the campaign there are also differing patterns on the two pages of the leaders.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Spanish political party leaders tend not to post often, when they do post they tend to include visuals and offer a positive tone providing information of a thematic nature inviting engagement and attempting to mobilise supporters. Despite the paucity of leaders' communication, social media users respond in significant numbers, though the page of Pablo Iglesias proved the most vibrant. This is not only evidenced in the overall number of comments but by the fact conversations between users are visible on his posts. In particular, second level comments and responses to them indicate a certain degree of argument took place. E-expression largely took the form of voicing opinions across both pages, although critics did tend to use more in-depth, evidence based forms of dialogue to attack the host. Thus neither page had the character of an echo chamber; in fact a rich combination of supportive and critical comments was awarded to each party leader. Iglesias' followers adopted in general a more critical tone set in a conflict frame. Iglesias was also addressed informally and there was a higher level of uncivil language used on his page. Rajoy, in contrast, was treated largely with deference even by his critics.

More broadly, most comments were graffiti-style, responding to the post of the host, or a root comment to the post. However, on the page of Iglesias there is evidence of argument and discussion, evidence-based criticisms regarding his alternative platform for Spain, as well as some highly personal attacks. Therefore, his Facebook page, independent of the nature of the post, at points adopted the character of a third space with his supporters and critics debating the core issues, especially the economic crisis and issues relating to democratic regeneration. These issues also exercised commenters on Rajoy's posts,

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although less debate occurred. However, such instances are rare and overshadowed by the scale of simplistic forms of discourse.

It is likely that the forms and patterns of dialogue are caused by factors exogenous to the Facebook pages. We suggest Facebook commenting behaviour largely reflected the wider context of the election. The polarisation of society, riven with concerns for the future and uncertainty over who had the best political platform was played out within comments. Hence, as with dialogue among the opposing sides of the UK's EU referendum campaign, the dynamics on Facebook pages offer an opportunity to understand wider political dynamics in a society (Lilleker & Bonnacci, 2017). Equally the standing of the individuals, an established political leader versus an insurgent outsider, appears to have shaped the degrees of formality. Hence, again, we suggest Facebook dynamics offer insights into attitudes of broader Spanish society.

However, it is also possible to detect endogenous and page specific dynamics at play. The Iglesias page was a space where users were empowered by the community to make controversial statements, some insulting and uncivil, and were possibly encouraged by the fact that such comments could lead to some form of debate taking place. Therefore, users may have been more likely to engage in debate on Iglesias' page due firstly to the nature of other users' comments, controversial comments tend to elicit more responses, but secondly they adhered to the norms of communication that they viewed on the site. These factors might explain the predominance of the conflict frame and critical tone, both of which were particular to the Iglesias page, but may also have been driven by his radical platform and outsider status.

Hence within the polarised electoral environment, we detect two contrasting dynamics being played out on the leaders' Facebook pages: Rajoy's of minimal conversation, neutrality, civility and formality, Iglesias's evidencing almost the exact opposite. This summative finding suggests that specific dynamics developed relating to each of these leaders, relating to the contest, each leaders' brand and political standing, as well as corresponding to the communication dynamics of other users. Hence, we suggest that both exogenous macro-political and endogenous micro-platform factors shape the patterns of discourse found on the social media pages of these leaders and that studying these platforms can indicate trends in wider society and how social media can accentuate attitudes towards political platforms and leaders.

Political communication studies have traditionally focused on political leaders, parties and institutional political discourse, and although the uses of social network for political and electoral purposes have been widely researched in Spain, the focus mainly has been on Twitter. Hence, this research breaks new ground in focusing on Facebook and demonstrates that as the social network that provides greater affordances for citizens' interaction and debate this is fertile ground for understanding wider political dynamics. However, as a study of interactions on the pages of two leaders during a single contest the scope of this article is limited. Yet the research constitutes a first step in widening understanding of the dynamics of interactions on social media during elections, and so the impact the Facebook platform may have during a contest as well as the specific dynamics of the Spanish political environment. Further research is needed to build upon this exploratory study, taking the findings to form testable hypotheses to explore election dynamics during further contests, as well as between elections. Such work would pave the way for diachronic studies to see the evolution of Facebook comment patterns in Spain as well as comparative, cross-national research. Research could also adopt a more qualitative approach employing in-depth interviews with the more active users in order to understand 'why' commenters follow the identified patterns of behaviour. Hence we argue that Facebook offers fertile ground for understanding political dynamics and suggest this research offers starting points for pursuing a research agenda which aids understanding specific platform dynamics as well as

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how users interact and how candidate, party and political variables impact on the nature of their e-expression.

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Table 4. Dynamics of support and criticism on Spanish party leader's Facebook profiles

	RAJOY					IGLESIAS				
	Supports politician/ party	Criticises politician/ party	Supports candidate + criticises opponent	Criticises candidate + supports opponent	Other	Supports politician/ party	Criticises politician/ party	Supports candidate + criticises opponent	Criticises candidate + supports opponent	Other
Strategic	3 5.9%	9 7.5%	10 8%	0	7 14.9%	13 15.5%	3 1.2%	17 8.8%	4 22.2%	15 8.4%
Thematic	26 51%	68 56.7%	8 6.4%	1 12.5%	15 31.9%	39 46.4%	163 65.7%	9 4.6%	3 16.7%	55 30.7%
Conflict	22 43.1%	43 35.8%	107 85.6%	7 87.5%	25 53.2%	32 38.1%	82 33.1%	168 86.8%	11 61.1%	109 60.9%
Supportive to other user	8 12.1%	5 7.7%	8 15.1%	0	4 3.6%	65 29.5%	37 15.3%	21 31.8%	1 7.1%	107 13%
Neutral to other user	34 51.5%	23 35.4%	22 41.5%	0	58 51.8%	28 12.7%	20 8.3%	12 18.2%	0	170 20.7%
Critical to other user	24 36.4%	37 56.9%	23 43.4%	2 100%	50 44.6%	127 57.7%	185 76.4%	33 50%	13 92.9%	543 66.2%
Ask a question	4 1.6%	19 11.9%	7 6%	0	11 7.9%	15 2.5%	44 7.9%	3 1.5%	0	65 7%
Answer a question	88 35.2%	35 21.9%	42 36.2%	5 50%	24 17.3%	0	1 0.2%	0	0	4 0.4%
Other types of interaction	158 63.2%	106 66.3%	67 57.8%	5 50%	104 74.8%	588 97.5%	512 91.9%	193 98.5%	16 100%	82 96.2%
States an opinion	313 87.5%	137 62.3%	114 74.5%	8 66.7%	169 69%	831 95.8%	748 91.2%	250 90.9%	20 90.9%	1378 95.2%
Provides evidence	21 5.8%	77 35%	39 25.5%	4 33.3%	35 14.3%	29 3.3%	72 8.8%	24 8.7%	2 9.1%	52 3.6%
Other	24 6.7%	6 2.7%	0	0	41 16.7%	7 0.8%	0	1 0.4%	0	17 1.2%
Candidate/ party centred	317 88.1%	122 55.5%	130 85%	10 83.3%	62 25.3%	644 74.3%	427 52.1%	176 64%	16 72.7%	156 10.8%
Ideology centred	5 1.4%	8 3.6%	5 3.3%	1 8.3%	4 1.6%	21 2.4%	61 7.4%	27 9.8%	3 13.6%	118 8.1%
Issue centred	21 5.8%	71 32.3%	17 11.1%	1 8.3%	24 9.8%	132 15.2%	242 29.5%	66 24%	2 9.1%	414 28.6%
Other	17 4.7%	19 8.6%	1 0.7%	0	155 63.2%	70 8.1%	10 11%	6 2.2%	2 4.6%	759 52.4%
Shallow	206 57.2%	68 30.9%	16 10.5%	2 16.7%	154 62.9%	723 83.4%	615 75%	139 50.5%	9 40.9%	1238 85.5%
Neutral	140 38.9%	125 56.8%	105 68.6%	8 66.7%	77 31.4%	91 10.5%	125 15.2%	72 26.2%	8 36.4%	139 9.6%
Complex	14 3.9%	27 12.3%	32 20.9%	2 16.7%	14 5.7%	53 6.1%	80 9.8%	64 23.3%	5 22.7%	71 4.9%
Civil	357 99.2%	212 96.4%	151 98.7%	12 100%	242 98.8%	853 98.4%	619 75.5%	249 90.5%	20 90.9%	1249 86.3%
Uncivil	3 0.8%	8 3.6%	2 1.3%	0	3 1.2%	14 1.6%	201 24.5%	26 9.5%	2 9.1%	199 13.7%
Insult	4 1.1%	17 7.7%	12 7.8%	1 8.3%	9 3.7%	33 3.8%	244 29.8%	89 32.4%	9 40.9%	271 18.7%
Funny comment	3 0.8%	22 10%	3 2%	2 16.7%	11 4.5%	33 3.8%	51 6.2%	3 1.1%	0	154 16.%
Manicheist	30 8.3%	24 10.9%	107 69.9%	8 66.7%	25 10.2%	26 3%	21 2.6%	147 53.5%	9 40.9%	46 3.2%