
Laura Alonso-Muñoz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8894-1064>

lalonso@uji.es

Universitat Jaume I de Castelló

Alejandra Tirado-García

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5947-7215>

tiradoa@uji.es

Universitat Jaume I de Castelló

Andreu Casero-Ripollés

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6986-4163>

casero@uji.es

Universitat Jaume I de Castelló

Submitted

February 8th, 2022

Approved

June 27th, 2022

© 2022

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.35.4.71-88

www.communication-society.com

2022 – Vol. 35(4)

pp. 71-88

How to cite this article:

Alonso-Muñoz, L., Tirado-García, A. & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2022).

Telegram in campaign: the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication. *Communication & Society*, 35(4), 71-88.

Telegram in campaign: the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication

Abstract

The use of mobile instant messaging platforms has increased in recent years in political communication given the private nature of this form of communication, a trend which has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this research is to know the Telegram usage done by the main political parties within the election campaign. For this purpose, the Catalan election of the 14th of February 2021 are studied with a quantitative content analysis on a sample composed of 600 messages published by five political parties (PSC, Vox Barcelona, ERC, Junts per Catalunya, CUP and En Comú Podem). Results show that one of the most important functions of this platforms is the information and dissemination of its electoral programme. Regarding the main topics, the organization and functioning of the campaign and the political wrangling predominate. Our findings show that the position of the different parties regarding the independence of Catalonia, their political trajectory and their position within the government/opposition axis are conditioning factors of their communication strategy on this platform. Finally, the analysis of the public impact of the published messages reveals the disconnection between the parties and the citizens. In addition, a “more is more” effect which determines that the more messages are broadcast on this platform, the greater the number of views by users is, is detected. These data reveal new evidence on how Telegram is being used in the election campaign by political actors.

Keywords

Political communication, mobile instant messaging services, Telegram, electoral campaign, social media.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the traditional media have lost their centrality and are no longer the only transmitters of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). The development of digital technologies has led to changes in information consumption habits, as they have favoured communicative hyperactivity (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2018) that has multiplied content producers, generating certain risks such as the viralization of fake news, as happened in the 2018 electoral campaign in Brazil (Canavilhas *et al.*, 2019). It was in these elections when mobile instant messaging

platforms have burst into the field of political communication (Chagas *et al.*, 2021), and they are currently primary communication channels between parties and citizens. The privacy that these platforms offer provides an interesting space to disseminate information quickly and to a larger volume of the public, as opposed to other social media such as Twitter or Facebook. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has promoted these types of digital media within political communication in a context characterised by reduced physical contact with voters.

In this sense, digital technology appears to be diversifying the type of actor supporting parties' and, along with other related phenomena, this is affecting how parties organize themselves (Dommett *et al.*, 2020) and their communicative strategies. In this context, some authors argue that during the next few years these will be transferred to WhatsApp and Telegram in search for more direct dialogue, and the possibility that the citizens act as viralizing agents of that content (Bigas-Formatjé, 2019). Among the applications of this type, Telegram and WhatsApp stand out as key supports for accessing information (Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021), especially political information. WhatsApp has 2 billion active users worldwide and Telegram, with more than 500 million users, is one of the most significantly growing applications during 2020 (IAB Spain, 2021).

The emergence of mobile instant messaging services has led to fundamental changes within the field of political communication, modifying the dynamics of the election campaigns and the communication processes between parties and citizens (Zamora-Medina & Losada-Díaz, 2021). Thus, its use in political communication has had different effects that have been previously studied from the perspective of citizen participation (Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021), but despite its importance, this topic has still generated a reduced number of research in the aspect of its use as a tool of political communication by the parties. For this reason, in addition to the recent social relevance they are acquiring, the study of mobile instant messaging services is more original than the analysis of social network sites such as Twitter or Facebook. This research analyses Telegram since, in the general elections of April 2019, WhatsApp blocked the massive dissemination of electoral content to Spanish political parties, cancelling its use as a communication tool in the campaign.

In this context, it is important to know how political actors use Telegram in the election campaign, an insufficiently explored aspect. In this sense, this paper has a double purpose. On the one hand, to know the kind of issues and functions the political parties prioritize on this platform during the election campaign. On the other hand, considering that there are studies that have shown that the ideology of the party influences the incorporation and type of use of new technologies (Vergeer *et al.*, 2011), we intend to analyse which factors are able to condition the communicative strategies on Telegram. For this purpose, the Catalan elections held on the 14th of February 2021 are studied here. This is one of the first campaigns to be held in the context of COVID-19. Coronavirus affected the parties' activities and communication strategies. They were affected by mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic. A scenario that made physical contact with voters difficult and forced parties to prioritize digital contact channels such as Telegram. Besides, the study of the Catalan case places serious interest in the crisis derived from the independence conflict and the irruption in the Catalan Parliament of the far-right party Vox, being both polarizing movements seeking a more aggressive virality in the communication of their messages through Telegram.

2. The rise of mobile services in digital political communication

The news current outlook has undergone an accelerated transformation at all levels: by senders, receivers, and the media (Chadwick, 2017; Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2016). The progress of digital technologies has caused a diversification of the citizens' methods to access information. This factor has led to a trend towards complementarity in media consumption when obtaining information and knowledge about reality politics (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Citizens combine different media platforms to find out about current affairs, and this involves

a series of opportunities and risks, such as the diversity of sources and disinformation (Rossini *et al.*, 2021).

The mobile technology revolution has played a special role in this paradigm shift. Mobile phones have become the main Internet access device both internationally and in Spain (Fundación Telefónica, 2020). In consequence, the use of these devices for informational purposes has multiplied, especially in the context of political news (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018).

2.1. Social media and mobile instant messaging platforms for political communication

Social media have established a new communicative context between parties and citizens, thus becoming an important resource for political organisations when designing their communication strategies (Bene, 2021) and publicize their actions and campaign proposals. Thus, the incorporation of social media in the field of political communication has made it possible to stimulate contacts with citizens. Political actors have detected in these platforms the possibility of achieving communicative autonomy and dispensing with journalistic mediation so that they can control their messages from production to transmission (Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

Therefore, recent studies (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2021; López-Meri *et al.*, 2017) demonstrate how political parties use social media is conditioned by different factors such as ideology, the history and trajectory of the organisation, and the opposition that they occupy in the government-opposition axis. In the case of Twitter, for example, left-wing parties pay more attention to social problems, whereas right-wing parties show a high interest in issues related to the economy (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2021). The governing parties are more likely to highlight their management achievements, whereas organisations in the opposition dedicate their efforts to criticise political opponents, with emphasis on the governing party (López-Meri *et al.*, 2017). Also, opposition parties find in social media alternative means for mobilization and communication due to restrictions in traditional spaces (Kwayu, 2021). Other research has revealed that emerging parties focus on commenting on aspects related to the electoral campaign, while established parties focus on sharing the strengths of their electoral program (López-García, 2016). Regardless of these factors, it has been proven that Twitter functions as a bulletin board where formations and leaders employ cyber-rhetoric (Stromer-Galley, 2014) without taking full advantage of its interactive potential (Miquel-Segarra *et al.*, 2017).

The trends in the use of Facebook in the field of political communication are very similar. Again, recent studies on Facebook have highlighted how parties do not take advantage of its full potential since the use is merely self-referential (Koc-Michalska *et al.*, 2020). Political formations employ this platform to promote campaign actions, to ask their electorate the vote and to show their position regarding future post-election agreements (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2021).

As opposed to the use of these social media in recent years, political actors have seen in platforms such as Telegram or WhatsApp the possibility of establishing a closer and personal connection with citizens (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018; Zamora-Medina & Losada-Díaz, 2021). Political actors have gradually begun to incorporate them into their communication strategies, especially during electoral campaigns. This fact, among other factors, is motivated by the need to look for more private communication strategies given the public overexposure that users experience on social media (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2021). So far, these services were more frequent among the general society than among parties, though many political organisations have already begun to use them as communication tools (Rogers, 2020).

Among the applications that these services offer, the recent expansion of Telegram for political purposes stands out. This platform, free of charge and programming, was founded in 2013 by the Dúrov brothers. It enables users to send and receive messages without restrictions in a free and confidential way. The application provides direct communication without intermediaries, thus eliminating the informative noise resulting from the saturation

of publications in platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Urman & Katz, 2020; Wijermars, 2021). However, Telegram provides strictly unidirectional communication since subscribers cannot interact with the parties on their channels. In any case, this is not a disruptive factor in its political use in the Spanish sphere since, as recent studies have shown, the communication of top Spanish leaders is clearly anchored in a traditional media logic, focusing on one-way broadcasting, and mirroring mass media practices (Pineda *et al.*, 2020).

In accordance with the previous literature, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. What functions do political parties attribute to Telegram during the electoral campaign?

RQ2. What issues do political parties prioritise in their communication strategy on Telegram during the electoral campaign?

RQ3. Are there differences in the topics and functions assigned to Telegram based on the ideological axis, the government-opposition axis, and the trajectory axis?

RQ4. What factors influence the impact of messages in terms of views shared on Telegram?

3. Research design

3.1. Sample and data

Our objective is to know the use of Telegram done by Catalan political parties during the regional elections campaign held on February 14, 2021. This campaign is particularly relevant given the climate of political tension arisen from the Catalan independence conflict, in addition to, as it happens in the international context, the recent rise of the far-right represented by Vox. Moreover, the campaign was marked by the restrictions and limitations derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. The 15 official campaign days are analysed, including the day before the election, the election day, and the day later. During this period, all the shared messages on the Telegram channels of the Partit Socialista de Catalunya (PSC), Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP), Junts per Catalunya (JxCat), En Comú Podem, and Vox have been analysed.

The selection of these parties responds to three criteria. First, these political forces obtained representation in the Parliament of Catalonia and represent 90.58% of the votes. However, it should be noted that although the Partido Popular and Ciudadanos obtained parliamentary representation, they have been discarded from the analysis as they did not publish any message. Second, their political trajectory. The sample comprises four long-standing parties within the Catalan political scene (PSC, ERC, CUP, and JxCat) and two emerging parties founded in the 2000s (En Comú Podem and Vox). Third, its position (pro or against) the independence of Catalonia. Thus, we find parties whose objective is to create a new and independent state (ERC, CUP, and JxCat) and parties that reject this subject in their electoral programs (PSC, En Comú Podem, and Vox).

The messages were downloaded one-by-one, without using any software, from the Telegram application. The sample is composed by a total of 600 publications. The distribution of the sample by party is: 179 of the messages belong to PSC (29.83%), 47 to ERC (7.83%), 14 to JxCat (2.33%), 55 to CUP (9.17%), 203 to En Comú Podem (33.83%) and finally, 102 publications to Vox (17%).

3.2. Analysis

To answer the research questions, a quantitative content analysis has been carried out. For this, the analysis model based on the agenda and the functions posed in Telegram by the selected political parties was applied. A total of 14 categories have been defined to study the functions, while 20 have been included to analyse the agenda (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

The results have been grouped based on three variables. The first is the political trajectory, determined by the year the parties were created. Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (1931), the Candidatura de Unitat Popular (1991), and the Partit Socialista de

Catalunya (1978), are parties with a long tradition within the Catalan political system, while Junts per Catalunya (2020), En Comú Podem (2015), and Vox (2013) are recently created parties. For this reason, depending on their history and trajectory, political actors have been classified as traditional (1), or as emerging (2). At this point, it should be clarified that even though JxCat was re-founded in 2020, it has been considered a traditional party due to its close connection with *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), created in 1978 and dissolved in 2015.

The second refers to the nationalist axis. In this research, the analysed political actors have been classified depending on whether they defend the independence of Catalonia. For this reason, ERC, CUP, and JxCat have been considered as (1) pro-independence forces while the rest as (0) parties against independence.

Finally, the parties have been classified according to their position. Either they are in the government or in the opposition. At the time of the elections to the Parliament of Catalonia, JxCat together with ERC were in the government, so they have been considered as (1) government while the rest of the political forces were analysed as part of the (2) opposition.

The sample was analysed by four members of the research team. To calculate intercoder reliability, a test was performed in which 100 messages (16.67% of the sample) were analysed, achieving reliability of 0.95 for functions and 0.90 for issues according to Scott's Pi formula. The statistical treatment was carried out with the SPSS statistical program (v.27).

3.3. Catalonia as a case of study

The elections to the Parliament of Catalonia held on February 14, 2021, were relevant for various reasons. The first was the turbulent political situation that this territory has been experiencing for more than a decade. Since 2012, Catalonia has experienced a complex political process since a large part of the population supports independence from the Spanish state (Micó & Carbonell, 2017). In consequence, during these years the pro-independence forces have incorporated the subject of independence as a priority on their political agenda. Also, they demand that the Spanish State holds a legal and binding referendum that would enable them to create a self-governing state.

Related to this first reason is the disqualification as president of the Catalan Government Quim Torra (Junts per Catalunya) by the Supreme Court on September 28, 2020, for a crime of disobedience (Rincón & García, 2020). This fact led the vice president, Pere Aragonès (ERC), to assume the acting presidency. The impossibility of finding a candidate who would obtain the necessary support from the Parliament to become president led to the automatic dissolution of the Parliament on December 21, 2020, and elections to be called on February 14, 2021.

The third reason is the emergence of Vox, a far-right party, in the Parliament of Catalonia. Founded in 2013, Vox managed to penetrate the Spanish political system in the regional elections held in Andalusia in December 2018, where it obtained 12 seats. A year later, the party jumped to the national level in the general elections of April 2019. Vox managed to enter as the fifth political force with 24 seats, improving the results in the electoral repetition of November 2019, when it obtained 52 representatives in the Spanish Parliament. Vox ran for the Catalan elections with the slogan "Let's recover Catalonia" and won 7.76% of the votes (11 seats). The party became the fourth political force in Catalonia, ousting *Ciudadanos* and the *Popular Party*, the centre and centre-right forces in Catalonia.

Finally, the fourth relevant reason is that these elections were held in a context marked by the restrictions derived from COVID-19. During February, Spain was immersed in the third wave of the pandemic, and all the regions and provinces applied intense mobility restrictions to their residents. This fact conditioned the communicative activity of the political parties, which due to the difficulty of physically contacting their voters, promoted the use of digital channels, such as Telegram. Furthermore, the Parliament and the *Generalitat* of Catalonia established special measures for the correct holding of the elections, such as establishing age ranges or providing specific protocols to the members of the polling stations (Regué, 2020).

4. Results

4.1. Telegram's functions in the 14F electoral campaign

The results enable identifying the main functions granted to Telegram by the Catalan political parties during the 14F electoral campaign (RQ1). In general, three types of functions stand out (Table 1). The first is the use of Telegram as a method to share the agenda of the events in the campaign (35.3%). The Catalan political parties used this channel to inform citizens about the political events that were going to take place during the campaign (Image 1). This way, users could know when and where they were going to be held. In some cases, a link was provided to follow the events. This way, users avoided travelling and followed the restrictions imposed by the health emergency of the COVID-19.

Image 1. Example of a message with function Agenda and organization of political events.



Source: Esquerra Republicana's Telegram.

Table 1. Functions of the messages published on Telegram by the Catalan parties.

Function	%
Agenda and organization of political events	35.3
Program / promises	19.5
Political achievements of management / opposition	2.0
Criticism of the adversary	2.2
Agenda / Media information	9.5
Interaction	1.6
Repost	15.5
Participation and mobilization	7.3
CC: Values / Ideology	3.5
CC: Personal life / Backstage (Humanization)	0.8
CC: Fun / Entertainment (Humanization)	0.3
Humour	0.5
Courtesy / Protocol	1.0
Others	0.8
TOTAL	100

Source: Own elaboration.

**Telegram in campaign:
the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication**

At a second level, there are functions such as Program / promises (19.5%) and Repost (15.5%) (Table 1). In the first case, the parties share some issues incorporated in their electoral programs with those subscribed to their Telegram channels, showing some promises to fulfil in case of being elected. In the second, we find messages coming from other social media or instant messaging platforms which are shared directly, without adding more information. (Image 2). It is, therefore, about expanding the circulation radius of these contents to reach a larger audience.

Image 2. Example of a repost on Telegram of a message posted on Twitter.



Source: Telegram from Socialistes.cat.

At a third level, the messages related to the media agenda (9.5%) and citizen mobilisation (7.3%) stand out (Table 1). On the one hand, the parties consider Telegram as a media speaker to viralize the appearances of their candidates in the conventional media, as occurs, for example, with interviews in conventional media and televised debates held in different media, such as *TV3* or *La Sexta*. This strategy seeks to take advantage of the hybrid nature of the current media system (Chadwick, 2017). On the other hand, those messages where the vote is requested or the express participation of citizens in electoral acts are also highlighted

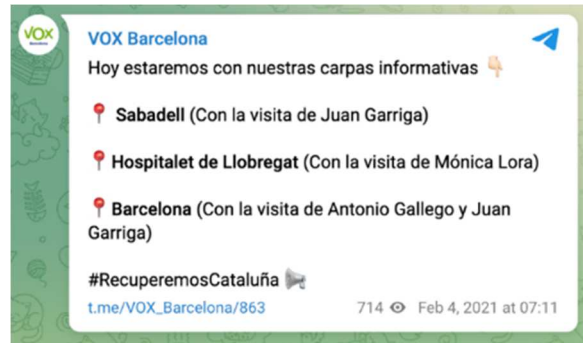
The rest of the functions register low or residual values, as occurs, for example, with humour (0.5%) or with messages related to the personal lives of politicians (0.8%).

4.2. The agenda on Telegram during the 14F electoral campaign

The analysis of the thematic agenda raised in Telegram during the 14F electoral campaign (RQ2) enables the identification of various evidence (Table 2). The most frequent topic in the messages published by all parties is related to the organisation and operation of the electoral campaign (26.5%). In other words, a large part of the messages shared by the parties analysed dealt with issues related to the campaign, such as the organisation of political events (Image 3). Thus, Telegram works as a bulletin board indicating the place and date of the events. The objective is to attract the participation of the largest possible public to the event as a mechanism to measure their electoral support.

**Telegram in campaign:
the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication**

Image 3. Example of a message about the organisation and operation of the electoral campaign.



Source: Vox's Telegram.

Table 2. Thematic agenda of Catalan parties on Telegram and mean average views/post.

Issue	%	Mean average views / post
Economy	2.2	1415.62
Social Politics	10.3	1603.23
Culture and sport	0.7	913.33
Science and Technology	1.0	846.00
Environment	1.8	764.27
Infrastructures	-	-
Corruption	0.2	2100.00
Democratic regeneration	0.8	1910.80
Game and political strategy	3.3	1622.90
Voting and electoral results	6.3	2467.39
Territorial model of the State	3.7	2355.32
Terrorism	-	-
Personal Issues	0.2	322.00
Organization and operation of the campaign	26.5	1555.43
Relationship with MMCC	10.5	877.24
Foreign Affairs	0.2	346.00
Justice	0.3	1337.50
Political harangues	13.8	724.94
No subject	17.8	623.55
Others	0.3	435.50
TOTAL	100	1262.33

Source: Own elaboration.

The second most used thematic category is 'no subject' (17.8%) and refers to those messages that, on the one hand, express courtesy towards other people and that, in general, are used to thank the support of voters or related groups. And on the other hand, to a high percentage of messages that comes from other social media without providing new content. In this sense, it is observed that the analysed parties do not have a specific and differentiated communication strategy in Telegram. Contrarily, they frequently use this platform as a channel to broadcast messages of other digital platforms, especially Twitter and Facebook.

**Telegram in campaign:
the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication**

Third, the messages that seek to harangue citizens (13.8%), those that deal with aspects related to social policy (10.3%), and those that show the relationship of the candidatures with the media (10.5%). In contrast, issues such as the economy (2.2%), culture and sports (0.7%), science and technology (1%), or the environment (1.8%) were practically not mentioned during the campaign (Table 2). In this line, we see that the Telegram communication strategy of the Catalan parties was characterised by the sending of messages with similar content to the electoral slogans that sought to increase the participation and mobilisation of the electorate and to show their appearances in the media. Introducing and sharing specific programmatic proposals is relegated to the background, especially those proposals unrelated to the field of social policies.

4.3. Conditioning factors of the functions and the campaign agenda in Telegram

To respond to RQ3, the data related to the functions and the agenda set in Telegram during the Catalan electoral campaign are analysed, considering three axes: the pro-independence axis, the government/opposition axis, and the trajectory axis of the parties.

Regarding the functions, there are notable differences between the data extracted according to the axes and the general trends detected (Table 3). First, it is observed how the independence axis is related to the type of function that the parties prevail ($\chi^2(12) = 87.960$; $p < 0.001$). Although all parties use Telegram to share their agenda of events (Table 3), if we analyse the data independently, we see that the pro-independence parties (ERC, JxCat, and the CUP) mainly use this mobile messaging service to mobilise their electorate (19%). This aspect is of minor importance for parties against independence (4.5%). The political situation in Catalonia since 2012 and the requests for a legal referendum to guarantee Catalan independence from Spain explain why the pro-independence forces have tried to capture the vote of the citizens. This fact connects to two aspects. First, the idea that these parties have made the most effort to share their values and ideology (9.5%) through this channel (Table 3) highlighting the importance of creating an independent State for Catalonia. Thus, taking advantage of the private and close nature of communication on Telegram, they try to involve and mobilise the Catalan electorate in the pro-independence cause with messages that advocate the feeling of belonging to a nation, based on Catalonia's historical rights, its history, its language, and Catalan civil law. This explains the close relationship between the function of mobilisation and that of ideological values in the pro-independence and government axis. Second, criticism of the adversary (6.9%), especially the PSC and all those parties that refuse to support independence.

Conversely, the parties opposed to the independence of Catalonia prioritise messages that seek to publicise their electoral program (20.7%), especially in the field of social policy, as well as to repost their interventions on other social media (17.9%). This fact is especially notable in parties such as Vox or the PSC that use Telegram as a channel for broadcast contents created on Twitter and Facebook. The data reveal how they also use this channel to promote their appearances in conventional media (10.3%) and thus show their participation in debates and interviews (Table 3).

Second, the data indicate that the government/opposition axis is also related to the functions of the messages shared by Catalan political parties on Telegram ($\chi^2(12) = 103.836$; $p < 0.001$). Since the parties in government were the independence parties ERC and JxCat, the patterns mentioned above are repeated.

**Telegram in campaign:
the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication**

Table 3. Message functions based on the analysed axes (%).

Function	Independentist axis		Government / Opposition Axis		Political history axis	
	Yes	No	Government	Opposition	Old	New
Agenda and organization of political events	33.6	35.7	23.0	36.7	31.2	39.3
Program / promises	14.7	20.7	14.8	20.0	27.5	11.8
Political achievements of management / opposition	5.2	1.2	6.6	1.5	2.0	2.0
Criticism of the adversary	6.9	1.0	6.6	1.7	2.7	1.6
Agenda / Media information	6.0	10.3	3.3	10.2	9.2	9.8
Interaction	0.0	2.4	0.0	2.0	3.7	0.0
Repost	3.4	17.9	1.6	16.7	9.2	21.3
Participation and mobilization	19.0	4.5	32.8	4.5	9.8	4.9
CC: Values / Ideology	9.5	2.1	11.5	2.6	4.1	3.0
CC: Personal life / Backstage (Humanization)	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	1.6
CC: Fun / Entertainment (Humanization)	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.7
Humour	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.6	0.0	1.0
Courtesy / Protocol	1.2	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	2.0
Others	0.6	1.7	0.0	0.9	0.7	1.0

Source: Own elaboration.

Third, we observe how the trajectory axis is also related to the functions granted to Telegram ($\chi^2(12) = 49.864$; $p < 0.001$). The parties with a shorter history (En Comú Podem and Vox) use this channel mainly as a speaker, either to publicise the political events they organise (39.3%), especially Vox, and to make their content from other social media visible (21.3%). Therefore, as in other social media, the new parties are more concerned with the form than the substance (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2021).

Regarding the thematic agenda, if we analyse the data in detail according to the axes of study, we find that it is influenced by the position of the parties in the independence axis ($\chi^2(17) = 104.714$; $p < 0.001$), their position on the government/opposition axis ($\chi^2(17) = 137.583$; $p < 0.001$) and on the party's political trajectory axis ($\chi^2(17) = 102.072$; $p < 0.001$).

Thus, the pro-independence parties (JxCat, ERC, and the CUP) dedicate their communication efforts on Telegram to talk about two interrelated issues: voting and electoral results (18.1%) on the one hand, and the territorial model of the State (10.3%) on the other (Table 4). Throughout the entire campaign, the pro-independence activists make a great effort to mobilise their electorate to go to the polls with a clear message: to have the necessary strength to carry out a legal referendum and achieve a state of their own for Catalonia. Along the same lines are those messages that deal with the possible pacts that each party will make if it wins the elections (6.9%). Particularly noteworthy is that Junts per Catalunya promoted a document in which the pro-independence forces promised not to agree with the PSC if they won the elections. This act generated controversy due to ERC's reluctance to sign it in the beginning.

Table 4. Thematic agenda proposed in Telegram based on the analysed axes.

Issues	Independentist axis		Government / Opposition Axis		Political history axis	
	Yes	No	Government	Opposition	Old	New
Economy	1.7	2.3	1.6	2.2	2.7	1.6
Social Politics	11.2	10.1	1.6	11.3	8.8	11.8
Culture and Sport	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.7	0.7	0.7
Science and Technology	0.0	1.2	0.0	1.1	0.3	1.6
Environment	0.0	2.3	0.0	2.0	1.4	2.3
Infrastructures	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Corruption	0.9	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.3	0.0
Democratic regeneration	3.4	0.2	6.6	0.2	1.7	0.0
Game and political strategy	6.9	2.5	11.5	2.4	3.1	3.6
Voting and electoral results	18.1	3.5	29.5	3.7	8.5	4.3
Territorial model of the State	10.3	2.1	4.9	3.5	6.1	1.3
Terrorism	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Personal affairs	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.3	0.0
Organization and operation of the campaign	31.0	25.4	27.9	26.3	17.3	35.4
Relationship with MMCC	4.3	12.0	0.0	11.7	9.8	11.1
External Affairs	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.3	0.0
Justice	0.9	0.2	1.6	0.2	0.7	0.0
Political harangues	7.8	15.3	13.1	13.9	24.4	3.6
No subject	3.4	21.3	0.0	19.9	13.2	22.3
Others	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.3	0.3

Source: Own elaboration.

On the contrary, parties against the independence focused their strategy on Telegram on launching slogans (15,3%) in favour of the unity of Spain (Table 4). These messages are frequent on the Vox channel since the party shared images or videos highlighting sentences of its leaders defending the inviolability of the Spanish unity and criticising the pro-independence leaders for breaking the law.

PSC, Vox, and En Comú Podem are the parties that most share their appearances in the media (12%) while emphasising their participation in debates and interviews with journalists. Likewise, these formations are the ones that most share messages from other social media (21,3%) and, therefore, the ones that least exploit the specific potential of Telegram.

The data based on the position that the parties occupy within the government or opposition present similar patterns to those described above because the government was conformed by JxCat and ERC. Both parties are pro-independence parties. However, we found a significant difference concerning the high volume of messages that refer to social policies (11,3%) by opposition parties (Table 4). This is because the CUP and En Comú Podem are the candidates that paid the most attention to these issues throughout the campaign. Especially noteworthy are those messages from the CUP that deal with energy poverty, and the high percentage of families that are affected by it, and the proposals for the deprivatization of

public health, as well as messages related to feminism, public health, and the LGTBI + collective in the case of En Comú Podem.

Finally, concerning the differentiation between old and new parties, the parties with a long political history usually focus on democratic regeneration (1.7%), compared to the new ones that do not mention the topic in any of their posts (Table 4). The party that speaks the most about change and regeneration is the PSC, a party with a long history and tradition. It also stands out that the established parties show the most concern for the territorial model of the State (6.1%), the vote and electoral results (8.5%), with the PSC and the pro-independence parties being who they most try to mobilise their electorate throughout the campaign. Emerging parties share numerous messages focused on the organisation and operation of their campaign events (35.4%), indicating to those who subscribe to their Telegram channel the place and date of the event.

4.4. *The impact among the user community of messages shared on Telegram*

To respond to RQ4, the impact of the messages on Telegram has been analysed considering the views obtained by each of them depending on their subject. In addition, the interaction has been analysed according to the ideological, the government/opposition and the trajectory axis.

The results show a positive and strong correlation between the number of messages shared on Telegram by the traditional pro-independence parties that are part of the government and the number of views obtained for each of them ($r = 0.703$; $p = 0.000$). In other words, the greater the number of messages shared by Junts x Catalunya and ERC on their Telegram channels, the greater the number of views they get. Thus, the more messages they share, the greater the impact they get. In the case of other political parties, the incidence is more moderate, although the observed effect is the same ($r = 0.307$; $p = 0.000$).

In analysing the number of views obtained by the messages shared on Telegram depending on the subject, we can observe two interesting trends. First, nine topics achieve an average number of views per publication greater than the general average (Table 2). Second, the users' interest differs significantly from the thematic agenda raised by the parties on Telegram. In this context, we observe how the interests of parties and users differ. Thus, while the parties analysed in Telegram prioritise those messages related to the organisation and operation of the campaign or the political rally, users focus their attention on messages about the election results and the territorial model of the State, which on average obtained the highest visualization by message (Table 2).

Users also pay more attention to those messages related to corruption, democratic regeneration, or justice, which on average obtain a higher volume of views (Table 2). However, the parties post a small number of messages about these issues on Telegram. The same occurs with those messages that deal with economics or social policy, without a high presence either, yet reaching a higher number of views per publication than average. In this sense, it stands out that the most read message during the campaign (8,800 views) was shared on voting day by the CUP Telegram channel. The message was about social policies that the candidacy wanted to implement in the case of victory in the elections, such as, committing to provide 100% public services.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Our findings enable inferring various relevant and original contributions on the use of Telegram in the electoral campaign. The use of Telegram has become widespread among political parties in the Catalan elections because the restrictions on physical contact and mobility deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, although the parties still do not present a differentiated and distinctive strategy on this platform, they have incorporated it as an additional information channel in their communication strategy. Results show that the parties

**Telegram in campaign:
the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication**

have used Telegram essentially for three purposes: to inform users about their campaign actions, to repost the messages published in other social media, and to mobilise the electorate to vote. The private environment that characterises Telegram enables parties to present a more direct discourse with users. In this sense, an ideological use of this platform is observed, something which could increase the polarization of the electorate.

About RQ₁, it has been detected that in general, political parties use Telegram as an information channel, especially to share their agenda of campaign events. Although in a complementary way, the parties also use this mobile messaging service to publicise their electoral program, publicising their programmatic axes and showing users the policies they would make in case of winning the elections. In line with previous research, it is observed how Telegram works as a sort of bulletin board likewise other social platforms such as Twitter (López-Meri *et al.*, 2017) or Facebook (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2021). These results also reveal that parties still lack a differentiated communication strategy on Telegram, since they refuse to create ad-hoc content for this platform. However, on many occasions, they share the same message with users that they have already launched on another social media. In this sense, this instant messaging service is configured as a channel for the re-dissemination of content to widen its reach among citizens, as a secondary social media to the accounts that political parties have on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Regarding the thematic agenda raised in Telegram by the parties during the Catalan electoral campaign (RQ₂), the results show how the aspects related to the organization and operation of the electoral campaign are a priority, paying less attention to the proposals on issues like economics or social policy. The hybridisation occurring between old and new media also stands out given that there is a notable percentage of messages in which the presence of candidates in interviews or debates carried out in conventional media are shared on Telegram. This type of messages seeks to expand the circulation radius of these interventions to reach a larger audience, thus combining the digital environment with the offline (Chadwick, 2017; Larsson, 2016).

About the agenda, the high volume of messages whose objective is to mobilize users to vote also stands out. These are short and simple messages, similar to election slogans. In this sense, we observe how the same patterns are reproduced in Telegram and Twitter or Facebook, where parties are concerned with showing the opposite political forces their electoral support rather than sharing their programmatic proposals on matters of relevance and interest to the citizenship (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.*, 2021; López-García, 2016). This fact may be due to the high polarization that occurred throughout the campaign where the parties raised the vote as a kind of plebiscite between advocates and opponents of the independence of Catalonia. A similar context happened in the general elections of 2016 and the Catalan regional ones of 2017, when after the negotiations failed, the parties divided the elections between those who wanted to govern and those seeking misrule (Simón, 2017; Pérez-Curiel & García-Gordillo, 2018).

The third original contribution of this research refers to the factors that influence the thematic agenda and the functions associated with Telegram during the campaign (RQ₃). Thus, the analysis results have proved that the party's position regarding independence, its position in the government/opposition axis, and its political trajectory are determining factors in how they use this mobile messaging platform. In this sense, it is relevant to observe how pro-independence parties that controlled the government have committed their communication efforts to mobilize their electorate to go to the polls to win the election and make independence increase. Conversely, the other parties have not presented any determined communicative strategy, focusing more on form than substance.

Finally, regarding the repercussion of the messages shared on Telegram (RQ₄), it has been possible to corroborate that the "more is more" effect occurs. In other words, the more messages the parties publish, the greater the number of views they get. This data is

particularly relevant in the case of the traditional pro-independence parties that were part of the government when the campaign took place. This shows a high correlation between the number of messages published and the number of views obtained. These data contradict the results obtained by previous research. In the analysis of the Spanish case, Alonso-Muñoz *et al.* (2021) detected that the “more is less” effect was predominant: the interest of users decreased when parties published a high volume of messages. Thus, users prioritise quality over quantity of messages.

In addition, it is observed how the agenda proposed by the parties on Telegram is not in line with the users’ interests, fact that proves the disconnection between the political parties’ online agenda and the interests of the citizenship (Pérez-Curiel & García-Gordillo, 2020). Thus, the issues that generate most of the attention among users, such as corruption or social policies, scarcely appear in the Telegram messages of the parties during the election campaign. This might be motivated by the lack of feedback given that Telegram provides unidirectional communication, key subject that already occurred on Twitter in the 21D Catalan elections (Pérez-Curiel & García-Gordillo, 2018).

The main limitation of this research is the study of a single platform such as Telegram. Even though this work presents results from a single campaign, several of its contributions can be extended to other electoral contexts. The results obtained enable us to know the main functions of Telegram, and the agenda proposed by the political parties. These aspects are so far unexplored. In addition, this research enables us to know what factors influence the use of this platform, demonstrating that the position of the parties in the independence axis, the government/opposition axis, and the trajectory axis are decisive. Consequently, Telegram is established within social platforms as an informative channel, as a loudspeaker for other social media, and as a medium to mobilize the electorate to go to the polls with highly ideologically branded messages.

Future research should study the activity of political parties on Telegram out of the election campaign. This will allow us to check whether the trends detected here follow the same dynamics during ordinary political activity. In this sense, this research is a starting point for understanding the political use of mobile instant messaging services in campaigning, a tool that is likely to increase its importance in electoral communication in the near future.

This work was supported by Universitat Jaume I de Castelló under the Research Promotion Plan in the R&D project with reference UJI-B2020-14.

References

- Alonso-Muñoz, L., Miquel-Segarra, S. & Viounnikoff-Benet, N. (2021). The construction of the political agenda on Twitter and Facebook during the 2016 Spanish elections: issues, frame and users’ interest. *The Journal of International Communication*, 27(2), 215-236.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2021.1899958>
- Bene, M. (2021). Topics to talk about. The effects of political topics and issue ownership on user engagement with politicians’ Facebook posts during the 2018 Hungarian general election. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 18(3), 338-354.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2021.1881015>
- Bigas Formatjé, N. (2019). Telegram y Whatsapp ganan peso en la campaña electoral y hacen del ciudadano una herramienta propagandística. *UOC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.uoc.edu/portal/es/news/actualitat/2019/094-whatsapp-telegram-propaganda-elecciones-generales.html>
- Canavilhas, J., Colussi, J. & Moura, Z-B. (2019). Desinformación en las elecciones presidenciales 2018 en Brasil: un análisis de los grupos familiares en WhatsApp. *Profesional de la Información*, 28(5), 1-9. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2019.sep.03>

- Casero-Ripollés, A. (2018). Research on political information and social media: Key points and challenges for the future. *Profesional de la Información*, 27(5), 964-974.
<https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.sep.01>
- Casero-Ripollés, A., Feenstra, R. A. & Tormey, S. (2016). Old and new media logics in an electoral campaign: The case of Podemos and the two-way street mediatization of politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 21(3), 378-397.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1940161216645340>
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chagas, V., Mitozo, I., Barros, S., Santos, J. & Azevedo, D. (2021). The 'new age' of political participation? WhatsApp and call to action on the Brazilian senate's consultations on the e-cidadania portal. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 1-16.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2021.1962779>
- Dommet, K., Kefford, G. & Power, S. (2020). The digital ecosystem: The new politics of party organization in parliamentary democracies. *Party Politics*, 27(5), 847-857.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1354068820907667>
- Dutta-Bergman, M. J. (2004). Complementarity in consumption of news types across traditional and new media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48(1), 41-60.
https://www.doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4801_3
- Fundación Telefónica (2020). *Sociedad digital en España 2019*. Madrid: Taurus.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H. & Goyanes, M. (2021). Fueling civil disobedience in democracy: WhatsApp news use, political knowledge, and illegal political protest. *New Media & Society*.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/14614448211047850>
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Ardèvol-Abreu, A. & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2021). WhatsApp political discussion, conventional participation and activism: exploring direct, indirect and generational effects. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(2), 201-218.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1642933>
- IAB Spain (2021). *Estudio anual de redes sociales 2021*. IAB Spain. Retrieved from
<https://iabspain.es/estudio/estudio-de-redes-sociales-2021/>
- Koc-Michalska, K., Lilleker, D. G., Michalski, T., Gibson, R. & Zajac, J. M. (2020). Facebook affordances and citizen engagement during elections: European political parties and their benefit from online strategies? *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 18(2), 180-193. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2020.1837707>
- Kwayu, A. C. (2021). Determinants of a political party's social media strategy: A comparative analysis of Tanzania's opposition political parties' Twitter practices. *Party Politics*.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/13540688211041039>
- Larsson, A. O. (2016). Online, all the time? A quantitative assessment of the permanent campaign on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 18(2), 274-292.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1461444814538798>
- López-García, G. (2016). 'New' vs 'old' leaderships: the campaign of Spanish general elections 2015 on Twitter. *Communication & Society*, 29(3), 149-168.
<https://www.doi.org/10.15581/003.29.3.149-168>
- López-Meri, A., Marcos-García, S. & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2017). What do politicians do on Twitter? Functions and communication strategies in the Spanish electoral campaign of 2016. *Profesional de la Información*, 6(5), 795-804.
<https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2017.sep.02>
- Micó, J.-L. & Carbonell, J.-M. (2017). The Catalan Political Process for Independence: An Example of the Partisan Media System. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 61(4), 428-440.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0002764217693277>
- Miquel-Segarra, S., Alonso-Muñoz, L. & Marcos-García, S. (2017). Buscando la interacción. Partidos y candidatos en Twitter durante las elecciones generales de 2015. *Revista Prisma Social*, 18, 34-54.

- Pérez-Curiel, C. & García-Gordillo, M. (2018). Política de influencia y tendencia *fake* en Twitter. Efectos postelectorales (21D) en el marco del Procés en Cataluña. *El profesional de la información*, 27(5), 1030–1040. <https://www.doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.sep.07>
- Pérez-Curiel, C. & García-Gordillo, M. (2020). Indicadores de influencia de los políticos españoles en Twitter. Un análisis en el marco de las elecciones en Cataluña. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 26(3), 1133. <https://www.doi.org/10.5209/esmp.64880>
- Pineda, A., Bellido-Pérez, E. & Barragán-Romero, A. (2020). “Backstage moments during the campaign”: The interactive use of Instagram by Spanish political leaders. *New Media & Society*, 1–28. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/14614448211047850>
- Quinn, K. & Papacharissi, Z. (2018). Our Networked selves: Personal connection and relational maintenance in social media use. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick & T. Poell (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 353–371). UK: Sage.
- Rincón, R. & García, J. (2020, September 28). El Tribunal Supremo confirma la inhabilitación de Quim Torra. *El País*. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-09-28/el-tribunal-supremo-confirma-la-inhabilitacion-de-quim-torra.html>
- Regué, J. (2020, December 4). El protocolo para las elecciones del 14-F: campaña telemática y voto por franjas horarias. *El Periódico de Cataluña*. Retrieved from <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20201204/elecciones-catalunya-protocolo-franjas-horarias-10113785>
- Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 213–229. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0267323120922066>
- Rossini, P., Stromer-Galley, J., Baptista, E. A. & Veiga de Oliveira, V. (2021). Dysfunctional information sharing on WhatsApp and Facebook: The role of political talk, cross-cutting exposure and social corrections. *New Media & Society*, 23(8), 2430–2451. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1461444820928059>
- Simón, P. (2017). The Challenges of the new Spanish Multipartyism: Government Formation Failure and the 2016 General Election. *South European Society and Politics*, 21(4), 493–517. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1268292>
- Stromer-Galley, J. (2014). *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Urman, A. & Katz, S. (2020). What they do in the shadows: examining the far-right networks on Telegram. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–21. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1803946>
- Valeriani, A. & Vaccari, C. (2018). Political talk on mobile instant messaging services: a comparative analysis of Germany, Italy, and the UK. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(11), 1715–1731. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1350730>
- Vergeer, M., Hermans, L. & Sams, S. (2011). Online social networks and micro-blogging in political campaigning: The exploration of a new campaign tool and a new campaign style. *Party Politics*, 19(3), 477–501. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1354068811407580>
- Wijermars, M. (2021). Selling internet control: the framing of the Russian ban of messaging app Telegram. *Information, Communication & Society*. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1933562>
- Zamora-Medina, R. & Losada-Díaz, J.-C. (2021). Nuevos escenarios para la conversación política: el uso de WhatsApp por parte de los partidos durante la campaña electoral de abril de 2019 en España. *Palabra Clave*, 24(1), 1–28. <https://www.doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2021.24.1.2>

Appendix

Table A1. Functions and issues defined in the analysis protocol used in this research.

Function	Description
Agenda and organization of political events	Information on campaign events (place, time, etc.).
Program / promises	Date of the electoral program or proposals.
Political achievements of management / opposition	Praise the achievements of the party and / or leader.
Criticism of the adversary	Direct attacks on the actions and / or ideology of other formations or politicians.
Agenda / Media information	Links to the media, for example, to share an interview.
Interaction	Direct question to users
Repost	Full messages from other social media without added text
Participation and mobilisation	Explicit request for the vote, financial donations or the mobilisation of voters or volunteers.
Community Building: Values / Ideology	They worship and strengthen the values and ideology of the party.
Community Building: Personal Life / Backstage (Humanisation)	They show aspects of the private life of politicians (hobbies, tastes, family, etc.) or elements of the backstage of the campaign.
Community Building: Fun / Entertainment (Humanization)	They aim to get closer to users through the use of entertainment.
Humour	They include memes, jokes, or other humorous devices.
Courtesy / Protocol	Thanks, condolences, ephemeris, etc.
Others	Unclassifiable according to the previous categories.
Issues	Description
Economy	Messages about employment, unemployment, wages, deficit, public spending, debt, crisis, taxes, entrepreneurship, economic sectors, contracts, self-employed, etc.
Social Politics	Messages about pensions, health, education, the welfare state, social justice, equality / inequality, gender violence, housing, immigration...
Culture and Sport	Messages related to cultural industries (cinema, literature, art, MMCC, social media, etc.) and sports.
Science and technology	Messages on research and development, Network infrastructure (optical fiber, Wi-Fi...).
Environment	Messages related to pollution, the protection of fauna and flora, climate change...
Infrastructures	Messages about services and infrastructures such as roads, bridges, etc., as well as about transport services.

**Telegram in campaign:
the use of mobile instant messaging services in electoral political communication**

Corruption	Messages about corruption mentioning specific cases, attitudes, behaviours, or concrete decisions.
Democratic regeneration	Messages about democratic aspects that do not work at present and need to be renewed / eliminated.
Game and political strategy	Messages talking about the intention to build a certain type of government or about possible (or impossible) future agreements.
Voting and electoral results	Messages dealing with surveys, polls, analysis and evaluation of electoral results or messages regarding the act of voting.
Territorial model of the State	Messages about the construction of a certain model of State, nationalism, independence, etc.
Terrorism	Messages about legislation, attacks, victims...
Personal Issues	Messages that refer to questions of the personal life of the politicians.
Organization and operation of the campaign	Messages about the organization of campaign events, such as meetings or the operation of the campaign.
Relationship with MMCC	Messages in which information about the appearance of a politician in an MMCC is shared without specifying anything else.
Foreign affairs	Messages about the European Union or international affairs.
Justice	Messages related to a specific judicial resolution, precautionary measure, ongoing judicial process, etc.
Political harangues	Messages in which the importance of the union is exalted, and the supporters are harangued to join the party and win. Like campaign slogans.
No subject	Messages about protocol issues, such as good morning or condolences or that come entirely from other social media.
Other	Unclassifiable messages according to the previous categories.

Source: Own elaboration.