Communication and disinformation in elections: research trends in Spain and Portugal

Comunicación y desinformación en elecciones: tendencias de investigación en España y Portugal

Rubén Rivas-de-Roca
Universidad de Sevilla, España
rrivasderoca@us.es
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5842-4533

Ricardo Morais
Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal
ricardo.morais@labcom.ubi.pt
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8827-0299

Pedro Jerónimo
Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal
pj@ubi.pt
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1900-5031

Abstract

The relationship between politics and communication is not new, but it seems to have sparked renewed academic interest in recent years. The transformations that have affected contemporary democratic societies, such as digital technologies or the rise of disinformation, explain the concern about these issues. One of the topics of greatest interest are the elections, as the moment in which participatory democracy takes place. In this changing context, this study aims to carry out a review of the main research on political communication and elections in the Iberian area (Spain and Portugal), identifying possible similarities and divergences. The objective is to know the research trends (topics and methods) in order to later pose pending challenges. An in-depth bibliographic review was conducted published during 2008-2021 in WoS, Scopus and reference books. As results, similarities are observed in the methodological preference for content analysis, although the topics addressed differ depending on national circumstances, beyond a certain coincidence in the analysis of national legislative elections. In Spain, the action of the new parties on social networks has been especially addressed, while in Portugal the interest in television prevails. Likewise, the breakthrough of scientific production in Spain contrasts with the lower number of studies in the Portuguese cases. Researchers from both countries face the challenge of offering comparative studies between elections, as well as implementing a higher methodological plurality that allows to delve into the reasons of communicative actions.

Keywords

Political communication, elections, election campaign, disinformation, meta-research, comparative studies, Spain, Portugal.

Resumen

Las relaciones entre política y comunicación no son nuevas, pero parecen haber suscitado recientemente un renovado interés desde el punto de vista académico. Las transformaciones que han afectado a las sociedades democráticas contemporáneas, como la digitalización o el auge de la desinformación, explican la preocupación por estos asuntos. Una de las cuestiones de mayor interés son las elecciones, como momento en el que se materializa la democracia participativa. En ese contexto dinámico, esta investigación pretende revisar las principales investigaciones sobre comunicación política y elecciones en el ámbito ibérico (España y Portugal), identificando posibles similitudes y divergencias. El objetivo es conocer las tendencias investigadoras (temas y métodos), para plantear después los retos pendientes. Con este fin, se desarrolla una revisión bibliográfica en profundidad de investigaciones publicadas durante el período 2008-2021 en WoS, Scopus y libros de referencia. Como resultados, se observan semejanzas en la preferencia metodológica por el análisis de contenido, si bien los temas abordados difieren en función de circunstancias nacionales, más allá de cierta coincidencia en el análisis de los comicios legislativos de índole nacional. En España se ha tratado especialmente la acción de los nuevos partidos en redes sociales, mientras que en Portugal prevalece el interés por la televisión. Asimismo, la explosión de producción científica en España contrasta con el menor número de estudios en el caso portugués. Los investigadores de ambos países tienen el reto de ofrecer estudios comparativos entre elecciones, así como implementar una mayor pluralidad metodológica que permita ahondar en las motivaciones de las acciones comunicativas.

Palabras clave

Comunicación política, elecciones, campaña electoral, desinformación, meta-investigación, estudios comparados, España, Portugal.

Introduction

Electoral processes represent the most symbolic moment in democratic systems, as political actors say all kinds of messages to get the support of the citizenry. This political class is increasingly professionalized, providing great messages (Berrocal, 2017) with a mediatized logic. Mediatization is an established phenomenon by which messages adapt to the narrative of the media (Strömbäck, 2008), although in the last decade there has been orientation to the digital world (Stromer Galley, 2014; Ward, 2018). Campaigns focused on online action appear, allowing greater segmentation and impact of communicative items.

In the context of digital technologies, social networks (Koc Michalska et al., 2016), and more recently instant messaging services (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021), have become the main mechanisms for political participation. Despite the potential benefits of these platforms to increase the degree of public knowledge, the academy has shown remarkable attention for their effects on the boom in disinformation. This broad and multifaceted concept involves the dissemination of false or inaccurate content that causes distrust in public institutions (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Elections are also strongly affected by these contents, hence the verification agencies carry out initiatives to dismantle lies during these periods (Rodríguez Hidalgo et al., 2021).

Misinformation is experienced in a context of hybrid political communication, in which digital logic relates with traditional media system, both of which are necessary for the electoral success of the candidates (Chadwick, 2017). Social networks have implied a paradigm shift in political communication (Stieglitz & Dang Xuan, 2013), reinforcing the perception that we live in a "permanent campaign" (Blumenthal, 1980), while most political messages are intended to capture votes, regardless of their date of issue. However, the materialization of these phenomena is different by countries and geographical areas, since factors such as political cultures or media systems intervene (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In addition, elections continue to be held in national spaces determined by historical and regulatory constraints.

The aim of this research is to explore how these changes have been scientifically studied in Spain and Portugal. These are neighboring countries with such a recent political history, being part of the third democratizing wave of the 70s, but there are also important ideological differences in territorial fragmentation or digitization. Therefore, this study reviews the

main research on political communication and elections in the Iberian sphere (Spain and Portugal), assessing similarities and divergences. It is intended to know the research trends, in terms of topics and methods, as well as to pose possible challenges pending on the literature.

As a time frame, we set the period 2008-2021, because 2008 is the beginning of a new era of political communication by Barack Obama's campaign, marked by the use of digital platforms (Stromer Galley, 2014). This more direct approach to the audience, and thus less media-dependent, transformed the panorama of electoral communication. In addition, concerns about disinformation have intensified since 2016, particularly about the use of social networks by populist leaders (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016; Ward, 2018). Our study analyzes articles published in Web of Science (WOS), Scopus and reference books during 2008-2021, applying a selection criterion based on their relevance to the research area. The terms "elections", "disinformation" or "campaign" are used as the main search markers in the title or keywords of articles.

The sample amounts to 49 scientific publications conducted in Spain and/or Portugal and uses the above terms, regardless of their language or the nationality of authors and journals. In a breakdown, 27 contributions refer to Spain, 19 to Portugal and only three conduct a comparative approach between the two countries. The search includes the main international journals and publishers in English, for which the words set as criteria are translated. Collection of data has been manual and shared between the three researchers. Thematic analysis is used as a pattern to find emerging issues (Brake & Clarke, 2006), based on the definition of common codes for topics such as the geographic scope of elections, the parties considered or the preferred methodology.

In order to carry out a literature review of the main research on political communication, our contribution employs the following structure. First, there is a background of political communication during electoral periods, with special attention to the Iberian countries. The findings are presented separately for Spain and Portugal. In each of them, the type of elections, the agendas (campaign issues), the most studied social networks, the disinformation phenomena and the methods used for the scientific study (quantitative, qualitative, etc.) are analyzed. Finally, this article identifies topics that are still scarcely addressed, which allows to suggest lines of future research.

Background of political communication in electoral periods

Political communication refers to interactions between political actors (parties and leaders), the media and citizens, which are currently happening in a mediatized way (Castromil et al., 2020a). This flow of communication is essential to the democratic system, based on the idea that members of a community need information to make their political decisions. One of the main ways of public intervention is voting, hence the importance of elections. Since the emergence of the mass media, political communication has been gaining social participation, now applied from the aforementioned hybrid perspective between traditional media and digital platforms (Chadwick, 2017).

The technological transformation caused new communicative practices, among which an increase in the spectacularization in the television era (Donofrio & Rubio Moraga, 2019). The rapid emergence of new political parties in Spain since 2014 is an example of how mediatized politics now revolves around the construction of influential profiles. In the face of this cyber campaign, mainstream media is in a weak position.

The literature has indicated that Twitter is the main social network for electoral purposes, thanks to its capacity for immediacy and its adaptability to different political contexts (Jungherr, 2016). Facebook has also been widely used for these purposes, although each social network is better suited to certain audiences and sociodemographic profiles, a fact that parties seem to know (Stier et al., 2018). The internal dynamics of these political groups have been modified by digital transformation, in addition to the gradual introduction of automation techniques and big data.

Social networks were initially interpreted as a tool to promote citizen participation. This optimism contrasts the democratic threat posed by misinformation, developed primarily through social networks. In fact, Twitter has been the subject of several disinformation campaigns during election periods, which were characterized by the massive use of bots (Keller et al., 2020). In any case, social networks have potential advantages, such as a communication model in which the public plays a more active role and disadvantages. Continuous access to data can lead to passive consumption of information, also social networks have more capacity to generate selective exposure using echo chambers (Castromil et al., 2020a).

On the other hand, political leaders operate on networks from an unmediated perspective. Consequently, the ability to influence and make something viral is fundamental to the success of a candidate. This has been especially exploited by populist leaders, who focus their speech on appealing directly to citizens and positioning themselves as equals, rejecting elites (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). The citizen accesses information intentionally filtered by the political leader. However, both the introduction of digital technologies and the shaping of populist discourse depend largely on the political features of each territory.

According to the comparative media models of Hallin and Mancini (2004), Spain and Portugal are within the polarized pluralist system. Both countries have a history of late democratization and a strong political party. In addition, certain features of dirigisme and patronage, derived from the poor development of rational-legal authority against their European counterparts, are observed. At the media level, this means a high level of political parallelism, as well as a limited professionalization of journalism.

The authors of the influential proposal for comparative media models have qualified their validity after the advent of social media and digital platforms (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). Technological convergence leads to a possible reduction in the differences between these systems, due to the equalizing capacity of Internet. Therefore, the survival of the traditional polarized model in the Iberian countries must be interpreted with caution.

Although there are similarities in the political and informational context, there are also significant differences. Portugal's system of territorial organization is centralized, which means fewer elections. The agenda of the elections in Portugal tends to leave aside regional issues (Lagares Díez *et al*., 2020), contrary to what happens in Spain, where there is emphasis in historical reasons. The latter country has also experienced the appearance of new parties, which have deepen into a discursive polarization (López García & Valera Ordaz, 2017). According to the recent findings in research on disinformation in social networks (Alonso López *et al*., 2021), the Portuguese public sphere is perceived as less polarized, with the debate prevailing for thematic issues.

The interest in deepening the study of political communication in the Iberian countries is triggered by the parallel emergence of extreme right parties: Vox (Spain) and Chega (Portugal). Vox has been the third force in Spain, following the first electoral success in the elections in Andalucía in December

2018, where it managed to monopolize social media care (Rivas de Roca *et al.*, 2020). Regarding Chega, as well as Vox, it shares the ideas to the homeland and order (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020), but its messages are less critical towards the old elites and, so far, has garnered less electoral success (Mendes & Dennison, 2021). The two parties show that democracy in the Iberian Peninsula is undergoing changes, which makes it necessary to inquire about how the academy has questioned itself about these processes.

Political communication and elections in Spain

Since 2008, the crisis of traditional parties and the emergence of new political actors and forms of communication have focused on academic studies in Spain. The period 2015-2016 was particularly intense by the repetition of general elections and the entry into the Congress of the deputies of "Podemos" and "Ciudadanos". The communication of its leaders in social networks has been extensively analyzed (García Ortega & Zugasti Azagra, 2018; Suau Gomila *et al.*, 2020), to which are added more extensive studies on the different speeches and agendas that structured the campaign (López García & Valera Ordaz, 2017).

The predilection for the general elections was also observed in 2011 (Zamora Medina & Zurutuza Muñoz, 2014) and the electoral repetition of 2019 (Castromil *et al.*, 2020b), but it is not a limitation for other elections to occur. Because of the appearance of Podemos, the 2014 European Parliament elections were particularly studied in Spain (Casero Ripollés *et al.*, 2016). These elections are not evaluated as an object in European democracy, but are analyzed to learn about the practices of new populist political actors, who are more prone to obtain representation in that vote in the case of Spain. It is striking that one of the few comparative research found in the Iberian countries concerns about European elections, particularly on the communicative style of right groups (Belim, 2020).

There was a temporary coincidence between the European, regional and municipal elections in Spain on May 26, 2019, but there are hardly any joint approximations to their communicative dimension, such as that carried out by Rodríguez Vázquez et al. (2020) toward national television programs during election night. Instead, references to autonomous elections are frequent in many territories (Córdoba Cabús *et al.*, 2021; Xicoy Comas *et al.*, 2021).

Studies normally focus on a single autonomous community, seen as a political whole, without making comparisons between regions. It differs from the situation at the municipal level with studies of specific localities (Nicasio Varea & Pérez Gabaldón, 2021) and others that address candidates for various mayors (Criado Grande *et al.*, 2012; Quevedo Redondo *et al.*, 2016).

The academy has also examined several municipal candidatures in an autonomous community, as Martínez Rolán and Piñeiro Otero (2017) carry out in Galicia, but this type of approach is scarce. Research on proximity tends to focus on regional policy (Rivas de Roca *et al.*, 2020) or municipal political figures with national influence (Sintes Olivella *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, longitudinal studies are more common in general elections (García Marín *et al.*, 2018), which arouse a degree of continuous academic interest over time.

Regarding the issues of concern to researchers, the emergence of new parties and ways of making politics in Spain has been addressed in different articles (López García, 2016; Casero Ripollés *et al.*, 2017; Suau Gomila *et al.*, 2020). This includes right formations such as Vox, in a booming trend of populism on a global scale. These investigations coexist with the construction of agendas during the campaign, both at the state level (Castromil *et al.*, 2020b) and autonomic level (Rivas de Roca, 2021).

There has been growing concern in recent years about the use of computer techniques by political parties, sampling in non-electoral periods (Calvo *et al.*, 2019) and in electoral periods (García Orosa *et al.*, 2021). These tools refer to big data formulas to better segment the information that is disseminated to the potential voter. The area of computing has still been little addressed due to the broad academic coverage of the candidates' communicative style (Zamora Medina & Zurutuza Muñoz, 2014; Quevedo Redondo *et al.*, 2016).

The analysis of the image and communication strategies of the political actors in the election is related to the use of social networks. In Spain, scientific publications have focused on Twitter (Meso Ayerdi *et al.*, 2017; Fenoll *et al.*, 2018; Marcos García *et al.*, 2021), in parallel with what is happening at the international level (Jungherr, 2016). Its adaptation to the features of political communication makes this social network as a preference, although the fact that it is relatively simple to analyze can contribute to its academic popularity. On the other hand, political action on Facebook has hardly been undertaken analytically (Sintes Olivella *et al.*, 2020), although phenomena such as paid political advertisements on this social network are categorized as a source of disinformation, as happens on Instagram (Aladro

Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020). This dissemination phenomenon of distorted messages, which undermine the credibility of the authorities, has been seen in situations such as Covid-19 or the crisis in Cataluña (Goyanes & Skoric, 2021), but little has been mentioned in electoral processes (Rodríguez Hidalgo *et al*., 2021).

On the other hand, there are some isolated approaches about the use of platforms in politics. Rivera Otero et al. (2021) provide an interesting contribution on the consumption of networks according to the vote, trying to understand how platforms condition democratic actions. To do this, they implement a comparative analysis of data from a survey, which contrasts with most research in the area. Methodologically, content analysis is the preferred formula for examining political communication in Spain (Fenoll *et al*., 2018; García Orosa *et al*., 2021). These studies are mainly aimed at social networks, leaving aside more classic approaches such as journalistic coverage (Xicoy Comas *et al*., 2021).

The centrality of the content analysis is evident in the different methodological designs that triangulate this technique with others that are more qualitative, such as the discourse analysis (López García, 2016; Meso Ayerdi *et al*., 2017; Nicasio Varea & Pérez Gabaldón, 2021). In addition, the combination of content research with metric studies is sometimes found (Marcos García *et al.*, 2021). The case study strategy functions as a structuring framework for some of these articles about political messages on social networks (Casero Ripollés *et al*., 2016).

Although digital platforms are the object of study of numerous scientific publications in Spain, there are few analyses of social networks derived from the sociological theory related to the topic (Martínez Rolán & Piñeiro Otero, 2017). Computational methods open the door to new possibilities in this direction, applied to language and feelings in elections (Córdoba Cabús *et al.*, 2021). For its part, the unique use of qualitative methods is extremely limited (Calvo *et al*., 2019; Goyanes & Skoric, 2021), which explains how the academy presents a quantitative orientation toward communication analysis.

The number of articles on political communication in Spain is high, but there is not so much variety in subjects of study and methodologies. Moreover, the concept of disinformation appears detached from the actions of the leaders, making it difficult to insert it as an element to consider. In any case, the studies collected show that Spanish research has a large group of specialists who deal with these issues, particularly since 2015-2016.

Political communication and elections in Portugal

In a mediatized context since 2009, there has been an increase in the interest of academics in political communication and elections in Portugal. It is also important to remember that this was a relevant year for the country, with the holding of three electoral calls: european, legislative and municipal. That year was also a first opportunity, in the national context, to assess the potential of the Internet for election campaigns, in a movement that was strongly influenced and inspired by Barack Obama's "highly mediated e-campaign" (Figueiras, 2012a, p.17). Therefore, a set of works emerges to explore the way in which Portuguese political parties use the new media.

The first work in Portugal was devoted to studying the campaign for the European Parliament elections of 2009, analyzing not only the institutional websites of the parties, but also the use of blogs and digital social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, in promoting new opportunities to interact with voters. This occurs especially through quantitative approaches, which favor the identification of the presence or absence of certain elements that enhance communication and interaction (Canavilhas, 2012). Although the parties used many of these resources for the first time, it was also evident that there was still a low professionalization level of the campaigns in the country, largely due to the organization of the parties. But also to the power that the television still had (Lisi, 2013).

In these early work, many of the studies focused on the analysis of traditional media, such as press coverage of the European elections, through a qualitative approach that considered the perspective of Portuguese press correspondents in Brussels (Martins, 2012). The television was addressed for legislative elections, seeking to evaluate, through a quantitative and qualitative study, the emphasis given to parties, candidates and themes, but including dimensions such as campaign customization and "politics-show" (Cunha, 2012).

Notable studies for the 2009 elections also included room to address humor as a way of approaching voters in legislative and local government campaigns, the case of an analysis of one of the most successful television humorous programs —"*Gato Fedorento Esmiuça os Sufrágios*"— (Cabrera, 2012). Such research would eventually open an approach to politics through the humor that still maintains, exploiting one of the most discussed concepts in the field of communication, i.e., infoentertainment.

Some of the works represented a milestone in the studies on elections in Portugal, and were therefore compiled in a work on Os Media e As Eleições by Rita Figueiras (2012a), who is one of the main authors in the study of the political communication campaigns, with works like *A Mediatização da Política na Era das Redes Sociais* (2017), where an analysis is made on the changes taking place in the policy in the digital environment of the web 2.0. It is also important to note that some scholars (Freire, 2010) considered that 2009 marked a remarkable change in democratic terms, since the results of the municipal and legislative elections showed a rejection by the voters of the solutions of majority governance, forcing a greater understanding among the different parties.

After a year marked by three electoral events, the country returned to the polls in 2011 for an early election that took place at a time of financial crisis. The role of the austerity measures presented by the socialist minority government and the resignation of the Prime Minister, José Socrates, forced the country to look for international help, which led to the intervention of the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank Group known as Troika. Communication was dominated by economic issues. This was the case in the 2011 legislative elections, but also in the 2015 legislative elections, which ultimately influenced much of the work of academics. The research focused on an analysis of the impact of the economic crisis, in electoral and political terms, particularly in countries that were rescued such as Portugal and Greece.

The economic situation eventually led to changes in electoral campaigns, both in personalization and individualization and in the austerity measures implemented during the intervention period (Magalhães, 2014). In this context in which Portugal is a financially intervened country, the role of the European Union (EU) is questioned, leading some academics to assess the impact of this discontent on the 2014 European elections (Freire & Santana-Pereira, 2015).

Following the economic crisis affecting the 2011 legislative elections, in 2015 the country experienced a remarkable new episode for national politics, given that the so-called "non-alternation position" that characterized the national party system according to some sociologists was altered by the results of the October 2015 elections (Teixeira, 2018, p. 77). The formation of government that resulted from these elections, consisting of a minority Socialist Party government and parliamentary agreements signed bilatera-

lly with three other left-wing parties, BE, PCP and PEV, did not break the logic of majority competition between PS and PSD, but did change the traditional model.

The Portuguese political system had been characterized by "the absence of left-wing alliances reflected in the exclusion of the PCP and, since 1999, the BE from national governance" (Teixeira, pp. 78-79). The collaboration between these forces was called "Gerigonça", generating several works by academics seeking to analyze the context that gave rise to it (De Giorgi & Santana-Pereira, 2016). Their representation by the media (Barros, 2019) or the influence of media frameworks on readers' views on the new governance solution (Correia & Morais, 2020) were also analyzed, among other approaches.

After the elections of 2015 and four years after an unprecedented political solution in the national context, in May 2019 the country returned to the polls to elect European deputies and in October to elect national deputies. The legislative elections were, in this context, especially relevant, not only because the country had a government formed on the basis of parliamentary agreements for four years. But also because there was "an increase in electoral volatility in Portugal and Europe and uncertainty and a further fragmentation of party systems, with the emergence of new parties that challenge the institutional status quo" (Teixeira, 2018, p. 14). The 2019 legislatures indicated the entry of new parties to the Assembly of the Republic (PAN, Livre, Liberal Initiative and Chega), and also a new set of studies that are now paying attention to phenomena such as populism (Salgado *et al.*, 2021), and the communication strategies of their politicians.

Other issues arise related with populism, such as posttruth, fake news and a whole set of disinformation phenomena (Figueira & Santos, 2019). Some works that analyze fake news on Facebook during the 2019 legislative elections stand out (Baptista & Gradim, 2020), as well as studies that deepen on the relationship between partisanship and the proneness to share fake news (Baptista *et al*., 2021a) or how political ideology can affect belief in fake news (Baptista *et al*., 2021b).

In general, it can be stated that since 2009 there has been an increase in the number of work on political communication and elections. In this context, it is important to emphasize that scientific articles have privileged the study of legislative elections as the main object, at least in manuscripts published in the journals with the highest impact considered in this research. This is followed by the European, presidential and local elections. To understand this

approach, it must be mentioned, on the one hand, that between 2008 and 2021 the country was asked to elect national deputies on four occasions, without any party having obtained a majority in any of the elections. On the other hand, the economic crisis that affected Portugal and forced the Troika intervention also led to a large part of the studies to focus on the analysis of the conditions that led to this request for aid, i.e. the articles ended up dominated by financial matters and their involvement in domestic politics. This explains why some of the authors provide importance to the European elections, with the aim of understanding how the image of the EU was affected.

Conclusions and discussion

The scientific study of political communication in Spain and Portugal shows patterns of continuity and divergence, which force to estimate the different modalities of elections that occur in each country, as well as to question whether their political and media systems are comparable. The findings can be categorized into the following conclusions.

As a contribution in relation to Spain, a preference is found for general elections and, to a lesser extent, for autonomic elections as the object of study. In addition, there are publications on different candidates for municipal governments. However, there are no comparative studies between autonomous communities, while the European elections are not a relevant element *per se*. In contrast, the new parties have been the subject of attention in recent years, which coexists with classic issues such as agendas.

In Spain, Twitter is established as a main space for the study of communication, as Facebook, Instagram or even traditional media are analyzed to a much lesser extent. References of misinformation as part of elections are scarce, although the topic generically attracts attention in both states (Sánchez Esparza & Jerónimo, 2021). Methodologically, content analysis prevails, handled in a unique or triangulated way with other methods.

Regarding Portugal, our research reflects that its legislative elections are more studied. Although several academics have sought to study how political parties have used new technologies to communicate with voters since the election campaigns in 2009, the fact is that traditional media, particularly television, continue to dominate most of the studies analyzed. Social

networks have gained interest in recent years when they were part of the researchers' analyses.

Social networks are seen as a space for leaders to communicate directly with audiences and, from another angle, as environments capable of spreading fake information during election campaigns, which can affect voters' perception of specific parties and ideologies. However, there were still few studies devoted to analyzing the different phenomena of disinformation in the electoral context. Nor do we find little studies on municipal elections. Even so, since the autonomous elections (municipal) of 2017 there was a growing tendency of parties and candidates to use social networks, particularly, Facebook. A trend that continued in 2021, where it was observed the use of Facebook and, in some cases, Instagram, for political communication.

It is worth noting the interest that has already begun in relation to disinformation at the local level in Portugal (Correia *et al.,* 2019; Sánchez-Esparza & Jerónimo, 2021). From a methodological point of view, quantitative analyses also prevail in this country in a research approach that prioritizes content analysis. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, discourse analysis or focus groups, are rarely explored.

In comparison, the studies collected share the prevalence of the quantitative, the interest in elections at national level (general in Spain and legislative in Portugal) and concern for disinformation, which is detected later in Portugal. In addition, the volume of scientific production in Portugal on political communication and disinformation is significantly lower, leading to a shortage of publications in the journals Scopus or WOS during the period under review.

Therefore, we suggest that the growth of research around communication in elections has occurred in a little different way. In this sense, both countries lack the capacity to deepen on qualitative methods, making it difficult to unravel communicative actions. Some pioneering studies are already moving in that direction. In the case of Spain, the development of comparative studies between autonomies or the relation between this regional policy to the national policy is identified as a challenge, since the messages may differ to accommodate the voter. For its part, the academic analysis of these issues is still in the consolidation phase in Portugal, and it needs to go beyond the legislative elections, in line with very recent research.

One limitation of this work is its exploratory character, given the small sample, especially in Portugal. This has prevented systematic quantitative

analysis between these countries, which would favor a more rigorous contribution from their publications. As mentioned above, the lack of articles in high impact journals on the political reality is one of our main conclusions.

Significant transformations of Western democracies, including those of the Iberian countries, affect the media system and the action of citizens at the level of political organizations. On the common basis of late democratization, the scientific study of political communication in Spain and Portugal should further diversify its methods and approaches to contribute to a better understanding of the changes in the democratic system, although it is true that work has progressed in recent years.

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