

## Emotions and political leadership in the 2022 Andalusian Parliament elections in X

### *Emociones y liderazgos políticos en las elecciones al Parlamento de Andalucía de 2022 en X*

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**Received on:** 11/03/2024 **Revised on:** 11/05/2024 **Accepted on:** 26/07/2024 **Published on:** 01/09/2024

**Suggested citation:** Zarauza-Castro, J. and Méndez-Muros, S. (2024). Emotions and political leadership in the 2022 Andalusian Parliament elections in X. *Universitas XXI*, 41, pp. 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.17163/uni.n41.2024.08>

#### **Abstract**

*Social networks have become in recent years as essential elements to building political discourses, especially in electoral periods. Political parties develop specific strategies to communicating with their constituents through these platforms, based on leadership and the use of emotions. This research aims to analyze the communication strategies deployed by political leaders on X during the Andalusian Parliament election campaign in 2022, and for this purpose, a quantitative and qualitative content analysis methodology is applied to a sample of 690 tweets in the personal accounts of the candidates of the six parties with parliamentary representation. An advance of the results points to a communicative planning previously designed, that builds a discourse based on thematic lines, strategies, approaches and, especially, feelings according to the ideological, programmatic, and mobilizing axis established by each political formation.*

#### **Keywords**

*Political communication, elections, leadership, emotions, campaigns, Andalusia, X.*

## **Resumen**

Las redes sociales se han convertido en los últimos años en elementos esenciales a la hora de construir los discursos políticos, especialmente en periodos electorales. Los partidos políticos desarrollan estrategias específicas para comunicarse con sus electores a través de estas plataformas, basadas en el liderazgo y el uso de las emociones. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo analizar las estrategias comunicativas desplegadas por los líderes políticos en X durante la campaña de las elecciones al Parlamento de Andalucía en 2022 y para ello se aplica una metodología de análisis de contenido cuantitativo y cualitativo sobre una muestra de 690 tuits en las cuentas personales de los candidatos de los seis partidos con representación parlamentaria. Un avance de los resultados apunta a una planificación comunicativa previamente diseñada, que construye un discurso basado en líneas temáticas, estrategias, enfoques y, especialmente, sentimientos según el eje ideológico, programático y movilizador establecido por cada formación.

## **Palabras clave**

Comunicación política, elecciones, liderazgo, emociones, campañas, Andalucía, X.

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## **Introduction**

After the rejection of the 2022 budgets and arguing the instability of the parliamentary minority as a result of a distancing with Vox, on April 25, President Juan Manuel Moreno dissolves the Andalusian Parliament and calls regional elections for June 19. It advanced in five months the scheduled date, ending a legislature marked by the arrival, for the first time in Andalusian history, of the Popular Party (PP) to the Presidency of the Junta in 2018. In this way, despite the victory of the PSOE, the conservatives manage to govern this region, thanks to a government pact with the centrists of Ciudadanos and another programmatic one with Vox. A period of change begins in an Andalusia, governed by conservative parties and supported by extreme right-wing populism (Golder, 2016; Pérez-Curiel, 2020)

The campaign under study begins in the context of a legislature determined by the introduction of changes in the Andalusian institutions, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (López-Pavón, 2021) or polarization with the Government of Spain. The confrontation responds, among other re-

asons, to the results of the demoscopic surveys (Centro de Estudios Andaluces, 2022; Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2022) that point to the victory of the Popular Party, the stagnation of the PSOE and a progressive recovery of the big parties, in a scenario of fragmentation and parliamentary polarization (Nieto-Jiménez, 2022). The imminent disappearance of Ciudadanos, until then a minority political party in the Andalusian government, and internal conflicts between the parties of the alternative left describe a scenario with significant division levels in the elections. In a political landscape marked by polarization, what is unknown is the sum of the political parties of left and right, as well as the reaction of the citizenry to the far-right Vox party (Ferreira, 2019) and its possible entry into the regional Executive.

Therefore, the communication strategies of leaders and parties are fundamental to influence the citizen vote (García *et al.*, 2013). Despite studies that question the impact of debates (Lagares *et al.*, 2020), the media (Ramírez-Dueñas and Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020) or the campaigns themselves (Barreiro *et al.*, 2015), the electorate can determine the composition of the new government. In addition, in a society marked by immediacy, the importance of the audiovisual and the use of emotions (Bjerg, 2019), social networks are key element of political communication (Rúas and Casero-Ripollés, 2018) and, especially of electoral processes.

This research starts from the hypothesis that political leaders during the 2022 electoral campaign in Andalusia build a story on X (former Twitter) marked by a multiple combination of strategies among which stand out the use of emotions to influence citizenship. Based on a content analysis of the messages published on this social network by the six candidates of the political parties with parliamentary representation, it is intended to delve into the construction process of the electoral narrative.

## **Strategies, Leadership, and Emotions in Online Election Campaigns**

The Internet and new social platforms have revolutionized the way society communicates, changing countless facets of people's lives. In this sense, political communication cannot be understood today without considering the role played by social networks (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). The development of these new communication platforms has favored the emergence of

a new space for dialog between politicians, media and citizens (Jaráiz *et al.*, 2020a). It has led to a series of profound changes in the planning of electoral campaigns (Karlsen and Enjolras, 2016) and, especially, the development by parties of strategies specifically designed for social platforms (Enli, 2017).

Although, from the theoretical point of view, social networks expand the possibilities of political participation of citizens (Murthy, 2018), there are also authors who question it by reducing the role of influence of these new platforms to a new loudspeaker of information created by traditional actors (Castells, 2011) and in many cases used by governments and political parties to generate accessions to particular causes (De la Garza, 2020). In this line, political parties show low interactivity levels (Zugasti and Pérez, 2015) and tend to use social networks as propaganda mechanisms of self-promotion through the viralization of proposals and messages, especially during electoral campaigns (Pérez-Curiel and García-Gordillo, 2020).

Another consequence of the impact of social networks on electoral political communication is the loss of the role of the media as mediators (Díez-Gracia *et al.*, 2023) and the increase of the potential of political leaders as agenda setters or “news makers” (Aruguete, 2017). Through techniques closer to marketing, candidates become authentic political influencers (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro, 2019), working their personal brand through social networks (Verón and Pallarés, 2018), emptying them of ideological content and turning politics into a confrontation between celebrities who hold power (Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017). All these trends contribute to a political and social debate marked by disinformation (Pérez-Curiel *et al.*, 2022).

The latter leads to the construction of a unidirectional (Amado and Tarullo, 2015) and self-referential discourse on social networks (García-Ortega and Zugasti, 2018) marked by the reinforcement of the personality of the political leader (McGregor *et al.*, 2017). Despite the progressive increase in the weight of other social networks, such as Instagram or TikTok, typical of a younger audience (Martínez-Estrella *et al.*, 2023), X is running as the social network with the greatest potential for politics (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Thanks to their polarizing tendency and their ability to generate echo chambers (Cossard *et al.*, 2020), political parties rely on networks of followers that end up becoming authentic fan communities (Lee and Moon, 2021).

This phenomenon is based on recent scientific research that argues how the ability to mobilize through emotions is increasingly being considered in the planning of the communication strategies of political parties (Calderón-

Monge, 2017), a discursive complement of influence on the electorate (Grüning and Schubert, 2022). As a result, and despite the fact that academic studies on political communication have traditionally tended to focus on the rational component (Montecinos, 2007), in recent decades the interest of the Academy in the role played by affections and emotions in the electoral behavior of citizens has been increasing.

From this perspective, the parties seek to form a constructed mood among digital audiences, which is intensifying throughout the electoral campaign (Jaráiz-Gulías *et al.*, 2020b). Although there is a view that political communication on social networks is dominated by negative content, especially during electoral campaigns (Tucker *et al.*, 2018), there is no clear academic consensus on whether communication strategies with a negative emotional burden are more successful (Moret-Soler *et al.*, 2022) or whether it is positive emotional content that reaches a greater potential for viralization on the network (Ferrara and Yang, 2015; Dominguez-García *et al.*, 2023).

In a polarizing context, in which traditional media, and especially television, promote confrontation through the implemented representation of political feelings (Cazorla *et al.*, 2022), social networks become authentic public emotional spaces (Serrano-Puche, 2016), where users automatically tend to join currents of opinion and make judgments very quickly (Torres-Nabel, 2016). Therefore, it is advisable to delve into the strategic communication planning deployed by political leaders on social networks. Taking as a starting point the Andalusian Parliament elections of 2022, the following research questions arise:

PI1. What are the main themes and strategies deployed by the Andalusian candidates in X during the electoral process?

PI2. What role do feelings and emotions play in the discourse of these regional leaders?

PI3. How does the digital audience respond to the impact of messages posted by political leaders on X?

## **Methodology**

A quantitative-qualitative (Krippendorff, 2019; Silverman, 2016) and discursive (Flowerdew and Richardson, 2017; Van-Dijk, 2015) content analy-

sis methodology is applied, based on the issue frame theory (Aalberg *et al.*, 2017). The social network X is chosen for this research, due to the power and impact as a tool of political communication during the electoral processes (Campos-Domínguez, 2017).

With the aim of delving into the stories constructed by the candidates for the regional elections of Andalusia in 2022, all the messages that the leaders of the political parties with parliamentary representation publish in their personal accounts (see table 1) from the beginning of the electoral campaign (June 3, 2022) until its closure (June 17, 2022) are collected.

**Table 1**  
*Andalusian political candidates studied*

Candidate	Account in X
Juan Manuel Moreno (Partido Popular)	@JuanMa_Moreno
Juan Espadas (PSOE)	@_juanespadas
Juan Marín (Citizens)	@JuanMarin_
Macarena Olona (Vox)	@Macarena_Olona
Inmaculada Nieto (For Andalusia)	@InmaNietoC
Teresa Rodríguez (Adelante Andalucía)	@TeresaRodr_

To prepare the corpus, the information is downloaded through the Twittonoma program, and all the tweets published by the six leaders during the period studied. Subsequently, a screening is performed to rule out retweets or messages that cannot be analyzed by containing links or quotes to tweets that are no longer available. The sample universe is composed of 690 tweets that leaders post over a 15-day time frame.

To carry out this study, a coding manual composed of nine variables is designed and structured in three large blocks: issue frame/game frame (themes and strategies), discursiveness (feelings and tone) and message dissemination (virality). Each of these methodological strategies answers one of the research questions. The data obtained are finally processed for statistical exploitation using the IBM SPSS Statistics program (Version 25).

**Table 2**

*Correspondence between research questions and methods*

Research Questions (PI)	Indicators
PI1. What are the main themes and strategies deployed by the Andalusian candidates in X during the electoral process?	Issue frame (themes) / Game frame (strategies)
PI2. What role do feelings and emotions play in the discourse of these regional leaders?	Discursiveness (tone and emotions)
PI3. How does the digital audience respond to the impact of messages posted by political leaders on X?	Virality (retweets, likes and answers)

For studying the thematic agenda and discursive strategies, the general sample (n=690) is subjected to a random previous selection from 50 tweets to determine the main categories. When it comes to delving into the narratives deployed by the leaders, it is committed to studying the bias of the tweets (Yeste and Franch, 2018) from three levels (positive, neutral and negative), which allow to check the attitude of the candidates. Following previous methodological models (López-López *et al.*, 2020; Moret-Soler *et al.*, 2022), it also delves into the emotions displayed by the leaders, as well as the geographical approach from which they build their discourse (national, Andalusian, provincial, local or general). To evaluate the response of the citizenry, a viralization calculation formula (Pérez-Curiel *et al.*, 2022) is used that takes into account retweets, likes and answers ((SUM retweets\*2 + SUM likes + SUM answers) / SUM tweets published).

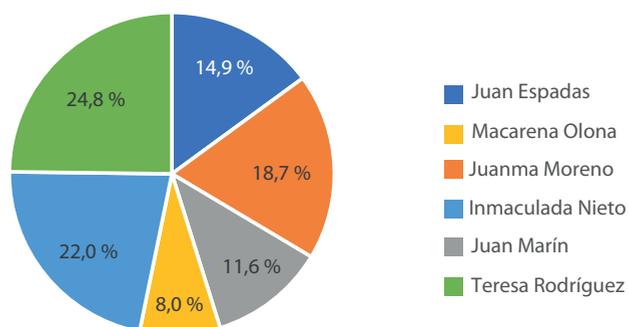
## Analysis of results

### Approach to sample

When determining the general characteristics of the tweets published by the six Andalusian candidates in the 2022 elections, it should be noted that the sample consists of 690 messages. In this sense, there is an average production per candidate of 115 tweets throughout the campaign and 7.6 messages per day. Candidates make moderate use of X to communicate with the citizenry, without reaching significant levels of emphasis.

If the data are disaggregated by each leader (figure 1), the results point to greater use by the leaders of alternative left parties, Teresa Rodríguez (24.8%) and Inmaculada Nieto (22%), as well as President Juanma Moreno (18.7%). While the socialist candidate, Juan Espadas (14.9%), and Ciudadanos, Juan Marín (11.6%), respond to average production, the low publication rate of the Vox candidate, Macarena Olona (8%), is striking.

**Figure 1**  
*Publication frequency per candidate*

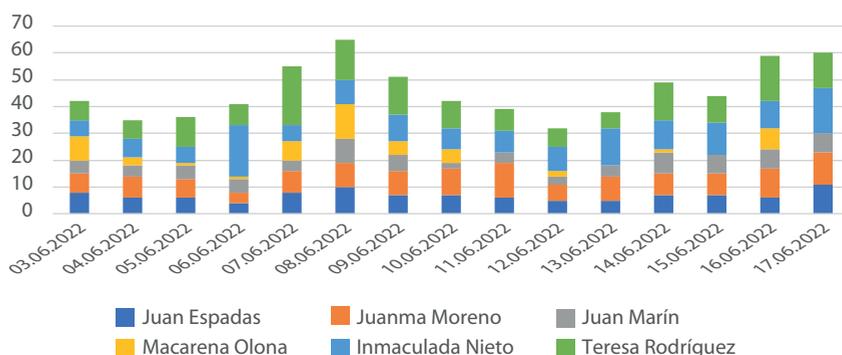


Deepening on the characteristics of the speech of the Andalusian candidates in X, it is worth highlighting the use they make of the audiovisual potential of the network, with a clear majority of messages supported by videos (43.8%) and photographs (39.1%), pointing to a communication strategy planned by their teams and not to spontaneous or improvised personal communication. Taking into account the figures achieved by each political leader, there is a greater tendency to incorporate edited videos in the case of Juanma Moreno (64.3%), Juan Espadas (51.5%), Juan Marín (51.2%) and Inmaculada Nieto (47.4%). The only candidates to break this trend are Teresa Rodríguez, who relies more on images (39.2%) and who has a considerable number of publications without an audiovisual element (16.4%), as well as Macarena Olona, who uses photographs to a large extent (63.3%).

Another interesting aspect of the sample is the frequency of publication of the candidates throughout the campaign. In this regard, the data indicate lower production in the days leading up to the televised debates on 6 and 13 June. An issue that may be related to the narrowing of the agenda of the

leaders for the preparation of the debate. On the contrary, higher figures are observed (Figure 2) in the days after these meetings, especially the first one, as well as during the last days of the campaign. As for the candidates, it is striking that the leader of Vox significantly decreases the number of messages on X during the second half of the campaign, going so far as not to publish any tweets in four days.

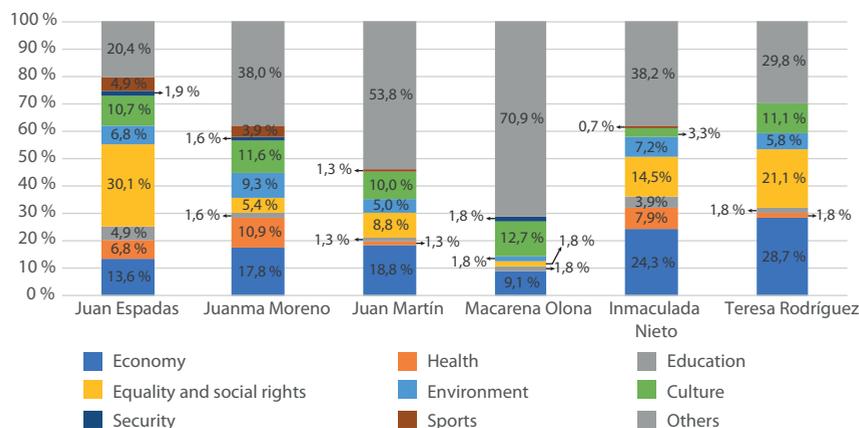
**Figure 2**  
*Number of publications per candidate per day*



### Theme and strategy of the Andalusian candidates

The study of the thematic agenda of Andalusian political leaders points to a remarkable thematic diversity (see figure 3). In this way, data show a greater interest in economic and employment issues (20.7%), equality and social rights (15.1%), culture (9.4%) or the environment (6.5%). On the contrary, the low impact of basic Andalusian government competences, such as health (5.4%) or education (2.6%), is significant. However, the most remarkable result of this research is the high production of other types of messages (37.8%), which do not address a political or management issue, and which are more related to the very routine of the electoral campaign.

**Figure 3**  
*Main themes addressed by candidate*



Deepening on the thematic construction of the narrative of the different candidates, it should be noted that the president and popular candidate Juanma Moreno designs the speech from a plurality of contents related to his management at the head of Junta de Andalucía, such as the economy (17.8%), culture (11.6%), health (10.9%) or the environment (9.3%), leaving behind other issues such as equality and social rights (5.4%) or education (1.6%). In the case of the socialist leader, the metrics point to a great concern for social policies (30.1%), ahead of the economy (13.6%), health (6.8%) or education (4.9%). For their part, the leaders of alternative left parties pay attention to equality and social rights, but to a lesser extent, focusing on the employment situation or the economy. Finally, as for Juan Marín (53.8%) and Macarena Olona (70.9%), it is a characteristic the relevance of messages that lack political burden or that focus on the very development of the campaign, minimizing management issues or political issues.

Regarding the strategies implemented by the candidates for the Andalusian elections, it should be noted that there is no definite pattern, with the tactics most commonly used being voter mobilization (23.8%), spreading ideology (22.3%), criticism of the opponent (17%) or campaign promises (16.4%). Rumbling the data by leader studied, the president of the Andalusian government Juanma Moreno develops a campaign based on promises (24.8%) or mobilization (24%), minimizing criticism of the adversary as much as pos-

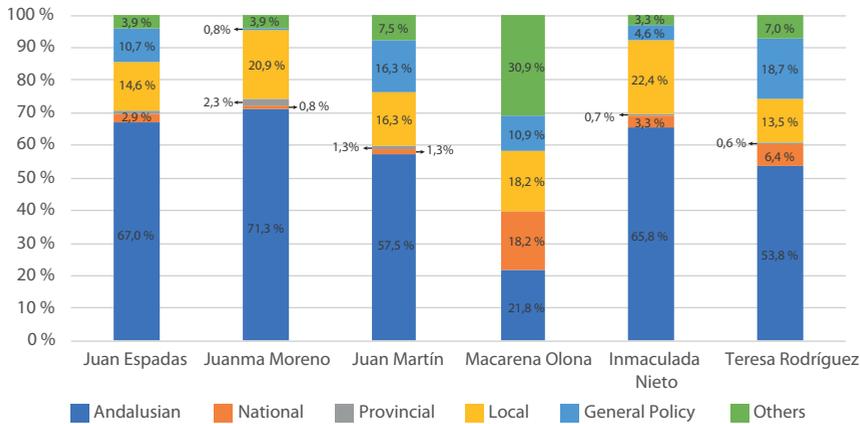
sible (2.3%). Meanwhile, the socialist Espadas constructs a story based on combining ideology (24.3%), promises (18.4%), mobilization (18.4%) and criticism to the contrary (13.6%). Meanwhile, the leader of Ciudadanos focuses on mobilizing his electorate (35%) to face negative polls on the party, while the Vox candidate is committed to ideology (27.3%) and tweets in which an explicit strategy is not detected (32.7%). Finally, it highlights the high percentage of criticism of the adversary in the messages of Inmaculada Nieto (30.3%), which combines with mobilization (27.6%), and Teresa Rodríguez (24%), with ideology (33.3%).

Another perspective of study is the thematic-geographical approach of leaders during the electoral campaign. In this regard, a majority of messages in Andalusian key (59.6%) were observed, followed at a distance by tweets in local key (17.7%) or general policy (10.1%). Significantly, messages in national (4.5%) or local (1%) key have little weight. This predominance of the Andalusian to the detriment of the national is maintained (see figure 4) in all candidates, except in the case of Macarena Olona, with several messages that lack a territorial approach (30.9%) and with a very small distance between the regional (21.8%) and national (18.2%) key. On the contrary, it is Juanma Moreno who uses a discourse with repeated reference to Andalusian issues (71.3%), practically silencing questions of state scope (0.8%) or general policy (0.8%).

### **The use of feelings in the political narrative**

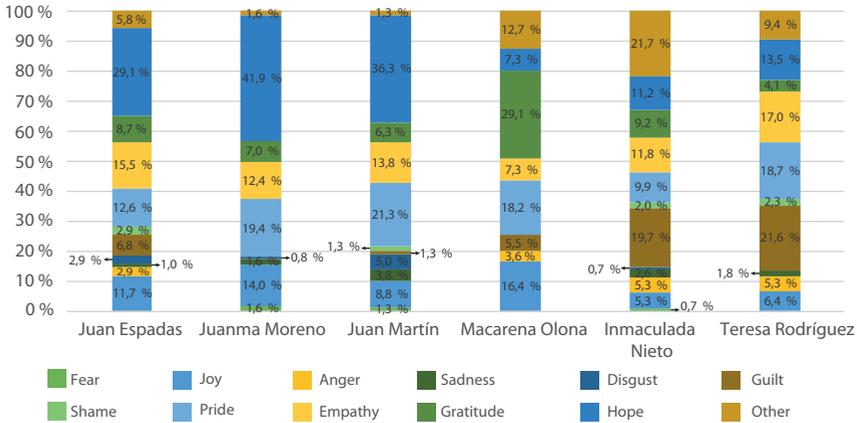
To delve into the narrative constructed by the candidates for the Presidency of the Junta de Andalucía, it is studied the bias of the tweets that they publish during the electoral campaign. The metrics obtained point to a clearly positive discourse (61.4%), with a reduced presence of negative tweets (28.3%) and especially neutral tone (10.3%). Considering the results disaggregated by each leader, it is confirmed that Juanma Moreno presents a campaign focused on positivity (96.9%), a strategy shared with Juan Marín (88.8%), Juan Espadas (81.6%) and to a lesser extent with Macarena Olona (63.6%). On the contrary, the story of Inmaculada Nieto (50.7%) or Teresa Rodríguez (49.1%) is based on negative messages denouncing the situation of citizens or public services.

**Figure 4**  
*Thematic-geographical approach by candidate*



In line with these results, the most employed feelings by leaders in their tweets (see Figure 5) are positive. Hope (22.8%), pride (16.2%) or empathy (13.6%) stand out. Also, a high number of publications focused on guilt (11.3%) have also been detected, starring the leaders of Adelante Andalucía and Por Andalucía, who criticize the management of the Andalusian government. In fact, they are referents both in the case of Teresa Rodríguez (21.6%) and in that of Inmaculada Nieto (19.7%). Facing these denounces of the left-wing party, Juanma Moreno and Juan Marín follow a strategy focused on hope for the measures they will implement in the next legislature (41.9% and 36.3%), as well as for the pride of the management carried out (19.4% and 21.3%). Juan Espadas' speech also highlighted hope (29.1%), empathy with citizens (15.5%) and pride (12.6%).

**Figure 5**  
*Typology of feelings per candidate*



## The response of digital audiences

Given the strategies and themes deployed by the candidates, the study of retweets, likes and responses to tweets allow sketching certain behaviors of digital audiences. This data may not be representative, given the high level of politicization quantified in user messages. In global terms, it can be said that the public pays a relative interest to the publications of the Andalusian leaders (1542), with an average of 304 retweets, 814 likes and 121 responses. However, these data should be disaggregated by candidate, as Vox leader Macarena Olona reaches a wide viralization (7059) compared to the rest. Thus, Inmaculada Nieto (1885) achieves high metrics, but far below the far-right candidate. Meanwhile, the leaders of the majority parties, both Juan Espadas (1092) and Juanma Moreno (917) reach lower figures. In the case of Juan Marín (674) and Teresa Rodríguez (612), the diffusion and response to his speech on the net is minimal.

Considering the different strategies employed by the candidates, there is more interaction with messages criticizing the opponent (1765) and spreading ideology (1528) than in those promising (1265) or trying to mobilize the electorate (1168). This data is consistent with the analysis of the viralization of tweets

according to the bias used, thus confirming a greater diffusion of negative messages (1706), ahead of positive messages (1427) or neutral messages (1256). Finally, it also reinforces the theory that citizens interact more with content related to public services that directly affect them, such as education (1848) or health (1770), compared to other political issues such as equality (1225), the economy (1210), culture (1095) and, especially, the environment (956).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Analyzing the communication strategies of political leaders in X during the campaign of the elections to the Parliament of Andalusia in 2022 as an objective of the research allows to generate new findings on the previous published literature (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Domínguez-García *et al.*, 2023; Murthy, 2018; Rúas-Araújo and Casero-Ripollés, 2018), as well as to reflect on demonstrated scientific arguments on a new leadership model in which the use of feelings and emotions (Jaráiz *et al.*, 2020a; Karlsen and Enjolras, 2016; López-López *et al.*, 2020; Serrano-Puche, 2016) occupies a prominent place in the political discourse on social networks.

Answering the first research question (PI1), the statistical results highlight a moderate use of X by political leaders to communicate with their constituents. However, it is remarkable in all the profiles analyzed a strategic planning previously designed by the communication teams, which acts ahead of the personal use of the network by the candidate. This issue is evidenced by the presence of professional videos or images aimed at balancing some weakness of the discursive potential of leaders in X during the elections.

Deepening on the construction of the applied communicative tactics, the results point to a construction of the agenda supported by thematic lines, strategies and diverse approaches according to the ideological, programmatic and mobilizing axis established by each political formation. It is noteworthy that most of the messages published do not respond to a defined plan of action and are related to the daily life of the campaign in an attempt to humanize the candidate and bring him closer as a person to the citizenry.

There is more unanimity in the strategy of framing the campaign in the field of Andalusian politics to the detriment of the national key. In this sense, the most obvious example corresponds to the attitude of the PP leader, Moreno Bonilla, who focuses on his government management as president of the

Junta de Andalucía and refuses to position himself on national conflicts. On the contrary, the only candidate who breaks this trend is the representative of Vox, Macarena Olona, who opts for a flat campaign, devoid of ideology and with a national approach very similar to the regional reference.

The findings regarding the second research question (PI2), focused on the use of emotions as a common element of the discourse of all leaders, a previous strategy is appreciated, with a majority of messages that bet on printing a positive tone to the campaign, although with divergences in the typology of feelings that the candidates use in their messages. However, the findings of this research point to a planning and selection of the tone and emotions used by leaders based on the political narrative that is intended to build.

In this line, the influence of the theme, the approaches and the use of emotions on the digital audience could be a differentiation factor in the viralization levels of the political message. In the case of emerging parties with higher polarization rates (Vox and Adelante Andalucía), the levels of viralization are exceeded compared to the results of traditional parties (PP and PSOE). Especially noteworthy are the tweets posted by the far-right candidate, which reach metrics seven times higher than other leaders.

This behavior of X users is connected to the third research question (PI3) focused on the levels of response of citizens to the impact of the political message. The research highlights that citizens interact more with polarizing discourses, in which opponents are criticized or ideology is spread, ahead of those in which measures are promised or votes are called. In this line, it is also confirmed a greater tendency to viralize more negativity than positivity in content, generating a more sensationalist than rational attitude, typical of the political conversation in the networks.

The common denominator that unifies the findings of this study points to a strategic planning of the messages disseminated by each leader in the electoral campaign, using X as another tool to support the construction of the political narrative. In this sense, it confirms a tendency to humanize the candidate and to print a code of feelings and emotions, regardless of ideological or programmatic factors. However, from the position of the audiences, the interaction and response of the public responds to viralization rates that favor polarization and the dissemination of a negative message and confrontation between the leaders.

One of the limitations of this research is that communication strategies in social networks involve different platforms, so it would be necessary to

study the communication of Andalusian candidates on other platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram or TikTok. In this line, for future research it would also be useful to delve into the responses of X users to confirm these trends of positioning of digital audiences in electoral periods. From another perspective, a comparative analysis between the personal accounts of the candidates and that of their political formations could be considered to determine the value of leadership ahead of the role of government and party.

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