

# Debating threats: fear in Spanish political election propaganda

## Debatiendo sobre amenazas: el miedo en la propaganda política electoral en España

*Debater as ameaças: o medo na propaganda política eleitoral espanhola*

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**ABSTRACT** | this study examines the use of fear by Spanish political parties in electoral debates since the collapse of traditional bipartisanship in 2014. The decision to use fear is due to the recent turbulent events that Spain has experienced politically and socially since new political parties emerged. Using content analysis and critical discourse analysis, this study examines how fear is used in the typical propaganda format of debates involving fewer intermediaries. Five debates from the parliamentary elections since 2014 in which more than two presidential candidates participated (446 interventions in total) are examined. Thus, the threats alluded to by the different parties, the propaganda techniques used and the themes that take center stage in the speeches when it comes to generating fear are identified. In this way, it is established that the parties use fear differently depending on their ideology and that their age or tradition is a secondary variable.

**KEYWORDS:** propaganda; fear discourse; political debate; emotions; Spain.

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**RESUMEN** | *este estudio tiene como objetivo principal identificar el uso del miedo por parte de los partidos políticos españoles en los debates electorales desde la ruptura del bipartidismo en 2014. Mediante un análisis de contenido y de un análisis crítico del discurso, se desglosa cómo se utiliza esta emoción en el formato propagandístico por excelencia, los debates. Se estudian cinco debates pertenecientes a las cinco elecciones generales celebradas desde 2014, en los cuales participan más de dos candidatos a la presidencia (446 intervenciones en total). Así, se identifican las amenazas aludidas por los diferentes partidos o las técnicas propagandísticas utilizadas que más protagonismo tienen en los discursos cuando de generar miedo se trata. De esta forma, se determina que los partidos usan el miedo de forma diferente dependiendo de la ideología que tienen, siendo su antigüedad o tradición una variable secundaria.*

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** *propaganda; discurso del miedo; debate político; emociones; España.*

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**RESUMO** | O presente estudo identifica a utilização do medo pelos partidos políticos espanhóis nos debates eleitorais desde a rutura do bipartidarismo tradicional em 2014. Através de uma análise de conteúdo e de uma análise crítica do discurso, esta pesquisa dissecar a forma como o medo é utilizado no formato de propaganda por excelência, os debates. São estudados cinco debates pertencentes às cinco eleições gerais realizadas desde 2014, nos quais participam mais de dois candidatos à presidência (446 intervenções no total). Assim, são identificadas as ameaças aludidas pelos diferentes partidos, as técnicas de propaganda utilizadas e os tópicos protagonistas dos discursos quando se trata de gerar medo. Desta forma, determina-se que os partidos utilizam o medo de forma diferente consoante a sua ideologia, sendo a sua idade ou tradição uma variável secundária.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *propaganda; discurso do medo; debate político; emoções; Espanha.*

## INTRODUCTION

Propaganda, by its very nature, aims to persuade (Huici, 2017), which makes emotions a crucial tool to achieve its goals (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001) in order to gain, maintain or strengthen power (Pineda, 2006). This concept has a long tradition. Aristotle (1988, 2002) already emphasized the importance of emotions in persuasive discourses, stating that arguments should be built around character (ethos), logic (logos) and the emotions of the audience (pathos). The emotional connection of propaganda has given it a negative connotation, often linked to audience manipulation (Bernays, 1928). The use of emotions in propaganda is especially pronounced in politics (Brader, 2005; Redlawsk, 2006), where social mobilization makes it increasingly necessary and characterizes political discourse as “eminently emotional” (Bisquerra, 2017, p. 30). Indeed, affective intelligence theory (Vasilopoulos et al., 2019) focuses on the connection between emotional responses and information seeking and decision making (Ridout & Searles, 2011). Antonio Damasio (1994, 2007), for example, has devoted a large part of his work to investigating how emotions determine thinking and behavior. Emotions in political discourse help to explain and understand various aspects of social reality. Emotions have contributed significantly to the rise of nationalism, populism and racism in European political discourse (Arias, 2016). However, emotions are both causes and consequences of certain phenomena. In the context of this study, Jiménez (2017) observes an increase in emotional content in political discourse in Spain following the collapse of historical two-party rule or, as Sánchez-Muñoz (2017) describes, mild multi-party rule in the face of regionalist parties.

Considering that emotions are well-known social mobilizers, it is logical that political propaganda has always used them (Arias, 2016), especially by populist parties and politicians (Nai, 2021). Therefore, this study focuses on fear, which is considered the strongest primary emotion (Boscoboinik, 2016). This negative emotion is linked to individual and collective feelings (Plamper & Lazier, 2012) and thus to sociocultural changes (André, 2005), whose trigger is based on the perception of harm/threat, whether real or not, and on the pursuit of survival (Barrera-Méndez, 2010). This characteristic makes fear a social controller (Altheide, 2017).

The main objective of this study is to examine how Spanish political parties have used fear in electoral debates since the end of bipartisanship to assess the role of this emotion in shaping the new Spanish political landscape. The new political landscape, shaped by voter dissatisfaction with the two-party system and movements like 15-M (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2017), makes Spanish propaganda a compelling area of study. There has been a shift from the dominance of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the Partido Popular (PP) to a new scenario in which Ciudadanos, Unidas Podemos and later Vox, previously minority parties,

have also become significant players. The debates are chosen because they convey political leaders' emotions directly to the public and facilitate leader interaction with minimal intermediary distortion.

### **Fear as a propagandistic resource**

Fear is a means to achieve the aforementioned propaganda goal. Ultimately, it is both politically and electorally profitable, as it is useful for the social control of the masses (Valdez, 2015); therefore, it has become necessary for political exercise (Catalán, 2018).

The interplay between fear and politics has led to propaganda strategies in which fear is pivotal. Polarization, for example, presents a Manichean view of situations and social groups, creating a divisive atmosphere that punishes neutrality (Huici, 2017). This dynamic portrays the other as evil and us as good and directly links the out-group to fear (Brown, 1967; Bauman, 2006; Lakoff, 2005). Another key technique is the creation of an enemy, whereby the opponent is portrayed as a source of harm and danger (Bisquerra, 2017). As fear generates rejection, it becomes a risk factor for racism and xenophobia (Furedi, 2018). Anger and fear are two complementary emotions in this context (Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Atrocity propaganda aims to associate the enemy with inhumane atrocities (Morelli, 2002; Çetinkaya, 2014). Finally, apocalyptic propaganda, rooted in theological duality, presents good and evil as two paths, one leading to salvation and happiness and the other to doom (González et al., 2016).

Fear in political propaganda risks backfiring without accompanying promises of hope, protection, and security. Altheide (2017) notes that people yearn for salvation from fear, which makes fear-based messages effective in public policy and social contexts. The savior strategy exploits this by stoking fears and portraying the sender of the message as the only solution to alleviate those fears (Charaudeau, 2009; Eggs, 2011). This approach is especially relevant in today's West, which is characterized by a culture of fear (Furedi, 2018) and a risk society (Beck, 1992) that create a pervasive sense of threat and vulnerability (Bisquerra, 2017; Furedi, 2018). As a result, protection becomes a coveted commodity and people are willing to seek safety at any cost (Rincón & Rey, 2008).

It is not surprising that fear permeates propaganda messages (Çetinkaya, 2014; Herrero & Connolly-Ahern, 2004). In Spain, the collapse of the two-party rule (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2017) was characterized by the use of emotions in political discourse (Jiménez, 2017). It is important to understand the role of fear in this new political landscape. For example, in the debate about the regional elections in Andalusia in December 2018, all political leaders relied on fear (Rebollo-Bueno, 2021). An important result of these elections was the entry of the far-right party

Vox into a regional parliament, a foretaste of their entry into the Spanish Congress in the 2019 general elections. Next, we analyze debates as a propagandistic medium with a direct connection between political leaders and the audience.

### **Debates as format: brief notes**

The change in Spain's political landscape after the December 2015 general elections has influenced the conception and resurgence of debates that have moved from face-to-face debates to four-way debates and more. Castromil and Rodríguez (2019) note that the lack of bipartisanship has hindered this format. This format is of political and social interest, as it is an important activity in democratic societies (Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2020). Debates are important electoral events that attract the most citizens (Luengo, 2011) and are fundamental for campaigns (Castromil & Rodríguez, 2019). They offer the audience a direct confrontation of arguments between political leaders without intermediaries (López-García et al., 2018). Participants must adapt to structured, timed segments that organize the debate (Castromil & Rodríguez, 2019) and present political leaders at eye level.

The influence of digital debates on platforms such as Twitter (now X) is of academic importance due to the transformation of politics into a form of entertainment (Coddington et al. 2014). This entertainment-centered approach shapes online discussions and fosters connections between users who share and respond to politicians' statements, reinforcing the concept of political entertainment exemplified by memes (Busto-Díaz & Ruiz-del-Olmo, 2016). Consequently, debates directly deliver politicians' messages to their audience while shaping digital and social media discourse. This adds an important dissemination variable, to which is added the fact that emotions themselves entail rapid transmission, reminiscent of contagion theory (Le Bon, 2004). Against the background of this discussion, this study pursues the following objectives:

General objective (GO): to identify the use of fear by Spanish political parties in the electoral debates following the collapse of traditional bipartisanship in 2014.

In addition, two specific objectives (SOs) are proposed:

SO1. To determine which political parties use fear and how much this emotion determines their political discourse.

SO2. Identify whether party ideology is a variable of interest in the treatment of fear in these propaganda discourses.

A research question (RQ) is posed that is of interest in the Spanish political context with three new parties, Ciudadanos (Cs), Unidas Podemos (UP) and Vox, which seek to differentiate themselves from the traditional parties, specifically

the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the Partido Popular (PP) (Simón, 2018). The RQ is: are there differences between the traditional parties and the parties of the new politics in terms of the use of the feeling of fear in electoral debates?

The media have coined the term new politics to refer to the political parties that have emerged in Spain's era of change (Alcaide-Lara, 2019). While the new politics initially referred to Ciudadanos and Podemos, it also includes Vox, which has become a significant part of Spain's new political landscape (Ferreira, 2019).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A hybrid methodology was employed. Quantitative content analysis was used due to its systematic nature. Following Krippendorff (1990) and Bardin (1996), we developed a coding sheet that was applied to the electoral debates of the six main national political parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies: PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, UP, Vox, and Sumar (in the most recent 2023 elections). Specifically, the debates broadcast by the Spanish public broadcaster Televisión Española (TVE) were analyzed, as this medium complies with the legislation on the use of public media for election campaigns. This legislation allocates time and appearances based on each party's votes and representation in prior elections (Ley Orgánica 5/1985). To delimit the temporal sample, we have selected the five debates for the general elections since 2014, which is considered the year of the break-up of bipartisanship (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2017; Simón, 2018) (table 1).

Considering that the first mentioned debate was a face-off between Mariano Rajoy (PP) and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) –other parties were excluded from debates due to insufficient representation in prior elections– it was decided to select the debate led by the same network, in which the four main parties, PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos and UP, were present. Vox was not included in these early debates because the rise of the party was to come later, from 2019, as was the rise of Sumar, which began in 2023. It is noteworthy that in this debate (on December 7, 2015) Mariano Rajoy was not present as leader of the PP, but Soraya Saénz de Santamaría (then Vice-President of the Rajoy government) was in his place. Participants in the debate on July 23, 2023 included Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), Santiago Abascal (Vox) and Yolanda Díaz (Sumar). Alberto Núñez Feijoo, the PP candidate, decided not to take part. Therefore, the study sample consists of five debates with a total of 446 interventions.

During operationalization, the coding sheet first identifies interventions that cause fear. Given the challenge of quantifying an emotion, two primary factors from psychology are used (Martín, 2011). First, fear triggers are examined, assuming that emitters who want to evoke fear use these triggers.

Debate	Date	Elections
1	14/11/2015	December 20th
2	13/06/2016	June 26th
3	22/04/2019	April 28th
4	04/11/2019	November 10th
5	18/07/2023	July 23rd

**Table 1. Sample of debates**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Second, the functions of fear are deemed crucial for the construction of the discourse by the emitter. An intervention is classified as fear-inducing if it fulfills the criteria of the first two variables. Thus, based on the possible intentionality of the sender, these two screening variables are used to determine whether fear is used.

### Emotion analysis

1. Fear triggers ( $\alpha=0.8$ ): (a) perception of harm/danger, (b) high-intensity stimuli, (c) perceptual/novel stimuli, (d) specific evolutionary dangers, (e) stimuli from social interactions, (f) conditioned fear stimuli, (g) none, (h) indeterminate, and (i) other/s.
2. Fear functions ( $\alpha=0.80$ ): (a) stimulate the subject to move away from the fear-inducing object, (b) prevent the subject from interacting with potentially dangerous elements, (c) create/reinforce social relationships, contributing to collective defense, (d) none, (e) indeterminate, and (f) other/s.

We investigated whether other primary emotions (sadness, happiness, surprise, disgust, anger) appear in these messages alongside the emotion of fear. To do this, as with fear, we identified the triggers of these emotions by drawing on the field of psychology (Martín, 2011; Domínguez, 2011).

3. Threats about (De Castella & McGarty, 2011) ( $\alpha=0.84$ ): (a) terrorism, (b) unemployment, (c) economic crisis, (d) none, (e) unspecified, and (f) other/s. This category is very important as fear is largely dependent on context (Rimé, 2011).

### Propaganda analysis

4. Propaganda techniques (Chomsky, 1992; Brown, 1967; Morelli, 2002; Eggs, 2011; González et al., 2016) ( $\alpha=0.80$ ): (a) polarization, (b) creation of the enemy, (c) atrocity propaganda, (d) savior strategy, (e) apocalypse, (f) none, (g) indeterminate, and (h) other/s.

5. Type of propaganda (Pineda, 2006) ( $\alpha=0.94$ ): (a) affirmation, (b) reaction, (c) denial, (d) none, (e) indeterminate, and (f) other/s.
6. Mention of political opponents ( $\alpha=0.91$ ).
7. Mention of opposing political parties and which ones ( $\alpha=0.91$ ).
8. The theme on which the discourse focuses (Graham et al., 2013; Aladro-Vico & Requeijo-Rey, 2020) ( $\alpha=0.84$ ): (a) animal rights, (b) human/civil rights, (c) trials/crimes, (e) economy/business, (f) education, (g) culture, (h) environment, (i) Europe, (j) government, (k) health/social welfare, (l) immigration, (m) defense/military, (n) religion, (ñ) science/technology, (o) conflicts/wars, (p) world news, (q) national news, (r) infrastructure, (s) campaigns and/or political parties, (t) norms and values, (u) corruption, (v) media, (w) Spanish nationalism/patriotism, (y) Catalan nationalism/independence/separatism, (z) Basque nationalism/independence/separatism, (aa) other types of non-Spanish nationalism/independence/separatism, (ab) gender/feminism issues, (ac) none, (ad) indetermined, and (ae) other/s.
9. Function and objective of the message (Graham et al., 2013; Bustos Díaz & Ruiz-del-Olmo, 2016) ( $\alpha=0.84$ ): (a) reflecting news, (b) stance/position of an individual politician, (c) stance/position of a party, (d) criticizing/discussing a topic, (e) soliciting public opinion, (f) giving advice/help, (g) expressing recognition/gratitude, (h) personal, (i) humor, (j) highlighting achievements, (k) none, (l) indetermined, and (m) other.

A codebook was created, and Krippendorff's alpha ( $\alpha=0.84$ ) confirmed data reliability, exceeding the 0.8 threshold. Likewise, as stated in the previous lines, the result of the reliability test was added for each variable. For the statistical analysis, frequency analysis and Pearson's non-parametric chi-square test were used to examine significant relationships between the variables. The analyzes were performed using Excel 16.65 and IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

For the qualitative analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied to the messages from the previous content analysis, using polarization and salvage strategies. To control the scope of this technique, only the units most indicative of the threats were selected. These were identified in the initial analysis, resulting in a single illustrative example. This selection reflects the importance of these strategies in the construction and use of fear, which is confirmed by the literature review. Van Dijk's (1997, 2006) framework guides this application.

1. Context: the environment in which the message is framed (i.e., political issues of interest).



2. Intentionality: purpose of the discourse in terms of polarization, whether it focuses on emphasizing the goodness of us or the wickedness of others.

3. Meaning: both the theme of the message and the lexicon, with both revolving around the idea of goodness/wickedness.

4. Form: considers the syntax, auditory elements (i.e., intonation), argumentation, and rhetoric on which the ingroup and outgroup identities are built.

5. Speech acts: Following Van Dijk (1998), any kind of promises, threats, congratulations, etc., through which the purpose of the discourse and the (possible) effect of the message on the recipient are constructed – which here refers to Austin's speech act theory (1962), continued by Searle (1969).

Furthermore, following Kress and Van-Leeuwen (2001) and O'Halloran (2012), this CDA is multimodal and focuses on the visual elements. This approach examines how figures, gestures and expressions in design reinforce discourse, particularly in the representation of us versus others.

## RESULTS

### Content analysis

The prevalence of fear in the debates analyzed is 10.8% (table 2), with Vox (52.8%) being the party that uses this emotion the most, although it did not participate in some debates. This party is followed by Ciudadanos (27.6%) and PP (23.4%). In descending order, Sumar (21.1%), PSOE (19.1%) and UP (6.7%) use fear. Anxiety is concentrated in the debates on the April and November 2019 elections, with Cs (13.0%) standing out in the first and Vox (38.89%) in the second. An example of the latter is the intervention of Santiago Abascal (leader of Vox): "In Catalonia, the separatist parties [described by the speaker as criminal organizations] have become criminal organizations in the service of a coup d'état" (Abascal, on RTVE, 2019a: 01:31:27).

In 2023, there was a decrease in the use of the emotion fear, which may be due to the fact that only three political parties participated in the event (PSOE, Vox and Sumar). In fact, the drop in emotion was most pronounced for Vox in this result. This is interesting considering that Vox was the only alternative to a possible coalition between PSOE and Sumar that participated in the debate. Furthermore, both PSOE and Sumar made it clear in the debate that their intention was to form a pact. Therefore, the use of fear could be a resource aimed, to a greater extent to the other participants and/or issues related to them.

		Cs	UP	PP	PSOE	Vox	Sumar	Total
Use of fear	Elections 20/12/2015	0.0	0.0	4.5	6.6	N/D	N/D	3.1
	Elections 26/07/2016	8.8	4.0	0.0	1.5	N/D	N/D	2.8
	Elections 28/04/2019	13.0	0.0	11.7	1.5	N/D	N/D	5.4
	Elections 10/11/2019	5.8	2.7	7.2	5.9	38.9	N/D	8.1
	Elections 23/07/2023	N/D	N/D	N/D	3.7	13.9	21.1	3.1
	Total use of fear	27.6	6.7	23.4	19.1	52.8	21	22.5
Absence of fear		72.4	93.3	76.6	80.9	47.2	79.0	77,5
Total		15.5 (69)	16.8 (75)	24.9 (111)	30.5 (136)	9.0 (36)	4.3 (19)	100.0 (446)

**Table 2. Frequency (%) of the presence of fear**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Next, the results are divided into two blocks that comprise the coding sheet: firstly, the analysis of the use of fear and secondly, the propagandistic analysis in relation to emotions. From the first block, four aspects stand out: (1) fear triggers, (2) functions of fear, (3) threats addressed in the message, and (4) whether fear is accompanied by another primary emotion. Regarding the triggers (table 3), the perception of danger is present in all analyzed interventions, and the mention of very intense negative stimuli predominates among the parties known as new political forces. The fear functions (table 4) show that the most frequently used function is to persuade the subject to move away from the source of fear (68.7%), with the exception of Sumar, which chooses to dissuade the subject from interacting with potentially dangerous elements.

	Cs	UP	PP	PSOE	Vox	Sumar	Total* <sup>1</sup>
Perception of harm/danger	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Intense negative stimuli	52.6	40.0	23.1	23.1	25.0	31.6	31.3
Conditioned fear-inducing stimuli	10.5	40.0	23.1	11.5	26.3	0.0	18.2
Total	19.2 (19)	5.1 (5)	26.3 (26)	26.3 (26)	19.2 (19)	4.0 (4)	100.0 (99)

**Table 3. Frequency (%) of the use of fear triggers**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

1. If there is an asterisk in the totals, this means that the sum of the totals is greater than the sample, as more than one category can occur in this variable.

	Cs	UP	PP	PSOE	Vox	Sumar	Total*
Prompting the subject to move away from the fear-inducing stimulus	73.7	100.0	76.9	61.5	63.2	25.0	68.7
Preventing the subject from potentially dangerous elements	26.3	0.0	15.4	34.6	42.1	50.0	28.3
Creating/reinforcing social relationships	36.8	20.0	19.2	26.9	31.65	25.0	27.3
Indeterminate	5.3	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
Total	19.2 (19)	5.1 (5)	26.3 (26)	26.3 (26)	19.2 (19)	4.0 (4)	100.0 (99)

**Table 4. Frequency (%) of the use of fear functions**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

One of the most interesting variables is the one that captures which threats/dangers are used when fear is employed. In this context, the category other is of great importance, because fear is an emotion that arises from the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Therefore, the dangers categorized as others but occurred more than five times during coding were assigned their own category. This variable shows that the most common threat is separatism/independence (21.2%), followed by the economic crisis (13.1%) and terrorism (10.1%). According to the Pearson chi-square test, there is a significant correlation between the threat of separatism/independence and the political parties ( $\chi^2_{(5)}=26.535$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). In particular, the parties that form the so-called right-wing bloc (classified as such due to historical agreements in the country), namely Cs (47.4%), PP (26.9%) and Vox (15.8%), use this threat to a greater extent. The same applies to references to terrorism: PP (19.2%), Vox (10.5%) and Cs (5.3%). There is also a significant correlation between the parties and the threat of an economic crisis ( $\chi^2_{(5)}=15.437$ ;  $p<0.009$ ), with UP standing out: “An economic downturn is approaching and we all know what would happen if the right or the PSOE reached an agreement with the PP” (Iglesias, on RTVE, 2019a: 02:04:52).

Most fear references lack association with other primary emotions (53.5%). However, when this is the case, sadness predominates (25.3%), followed by anger (12.1%). All parties follow this trend, with the exception of those known as traditional parties. When sadness is identified, the function used is the loss of a valuable goal (17.2%). An example of this is the argument against the autonomous communities of Abascal:

The State of autonomies has failed [...] That State of autonomies has rewarded the regions ruled by the most treacherous and disloyal. And it has punished the regions most loyal to Spain. [...] The State of Autonomies has made us unequal in our own homeland. They have given extraordinary power to separatist parties, which have taken away our freedoms with their totalitarian policies (Abascal, on RTVE, 2019a: 02:34:44).

The analysis reveals enemy image formation as the most common propaganda technique (73.7%), followed by polarization (42.4%) and the savior strategy (21.2%). Indeed, there is a significant correlation between the creation of the enemy and the speakers ( $\chi^2_{(5)}=12.136$ ;  $p<0.033$ ).

There are two certainties in these elections. The first is that the only political formation that can stop the sum of these three right-wing parties [...] is the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE). And the other alternative, because they have already said it ... is that if they unite, they will do in Spain what they are doing in Andalusia. I.e., they will have Mr. Casado as president, Mr. Rivera as a companion in some ministry and the extreme right in power. I think this is a very dangerous reality that we have to deal with ... And the far right in this country is fearsome because they say things like... we need to have guns in our homes, we need to abolish autonomies, that this gender-based violence is a fairy tale (Sánchez, on RTVE, 2019b: 01:09:02).

This is related to the fact that reactive propaganda (53.5%) is used most frequently, which shows a significant correlation with the parties ( $\chi^2_{(5)}=11.646$ ;  $p<0.040$ ). The only party that deviates from this is Vox, which tends to use denial propaganda (73.7%). Both the techniques and types of propaganda are linked to mentions of opponents. Most allusions are made to the leader of the PSOE (42.4%). This is consistent with the mention of opposing parties, as Pedro Sánchez's party receives the most mentions (18.2%). However, in this previous variable, the category none predominates (60.0%), which could be an indication of a tendency of the discourse towards personalization.

In terms of issues, Catalan separatism predominates (29.3%) and even shows a significant correlation ( $\chi^2_{(5)}=22.042$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), which is mainly concentrated in right-wing parties. In contrast, the left-wing parties differ with regard to the following topics: UP stands out in the areas of economy and business (60.0%), Sumar in health and social issues (9.1%) and PSOE is spread across different issues (economy/business, government, health/social issues and human rights).

The predominant function of the propaganda message is to represent a party's position (51.5%), followed by criticism of an issue (42.4%). There is a significant

correlation with the first mentioned function ( $\chi^2_{(5)}=28.228; p<0.002$ ). This could be due to the fact that the parties try to position themselves vis-à-vis their opponents and thus differentiate themselves from other political formations. Accordingly, the use of fear as a weapon leads to a rejection of the party spreading such a message.

Finally, the results show that in 89.9% of cases there is no gender-specific labeling. The most significant aspect is that Sumar uses gendered labeling of disasters and threats in 25.0% of cases, while PSOE uses it in 3.8% of cases. There is a significant relationship between this gender labeling and the environmental theme ( $\chi^2_{(1)}=38.375; p<0.001$ ).

### **Critical discourse analysis**

After conducting a content analysis, we identified pieces using polarization and savior strategies, key to fear-based propaganda on prevailing threats. The result is the analysis of a intervention by Pablo Casado, a PP candidate, in the debate of November 4, 2019, from 2:35:52 to 2:36:38. The analysis of this contribution is presented below according to the proposed structure.

#### *Context*

Casado was elected President of the PP on July 21, 2018 and has served as Deputy Secretary General for Communications since 2015. The debate was moderated by Ana Blanco (RTVE) and Vicente Vallés (Antena 3). He stepped down from his congressional mandate and the party presidency on April 1, 2022.

After Spain's April 2019 elections, no government formed despite PSOE winning a 123-seat majority. The PP won 66 seats, Ciudadanos (Cs) 57, Unidas Podemos (UP) 42, and Vox 24, it marked Vox's first significant participation in national debates. Casado's opening debate intervention centered on Spain's cohesion, addressing Catalonia's territorial issue, a key election topic, intensified by October 2019 events shortly before the debate. In particular, there were several days of pro-independence demonstrations in Barcelona, which led to riots on the Catalan streets and made violence an important axis in the political and media discourse (Fernández, 2019). According to the CIS Barometer of October-November 2019, 43.9% of respondents stated that the situation in Catalonia influenced their decision to vote for a political party or not (CIS, 2019). Furthermore, according to this barometer, Catalan independence was the fourth most common issue of concern in Spain.

After all candidates spoke, moderators gave Casado extra time to conclude. He used it to address Catalans, presenting his party as the best option. Interestingly, the CIS barometer of October-November 2019 assigned 11.6% of the votes to the PP (CIS, 2019), while the results published by GAD3 (“Última encuesta...”, 2019) estimated an electoral intention of 21.6% for the party, leading to 92 to 95 seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

### *Intentionality*

The purpose of this intervention is to make it clear to the recipients, especially the Catalans, that the PP is the only party capable of solving their problems caused by separatism. In fact, the PP refers to the history of its political formation to show its ability to resolve the conflict: “A party like the Popular Party, which has served Catalonia for forty years, knows how to apply the law” (Casado, on RTVE, 2019c: 02:36:02). This discourse combines an emotional intent, balancing fear with hope.

### *Meaning*

The main focus is on the Catalonia conflict, which is presented as a major threat. Polarization is used to create two factions: us, who are trying to defuse this threat, and them, the perpetrators of the danger. Casado criticizes Sánchez (PSOE) in particular for actions such as the reopening of DIPLOCAT and points out the urgent need to address this (Casado, on RTVE, 2019c). Lexicalization was essential to construct these two groups. The others were associated with broken families, non-speaking friends, guilt, independence advocates, school indoctrination, or ruin, among others. To build the us, i.e., what it means to vote for the PP and its measures, the sender uses positive vocabulary. Examples of this are justice, prosperity, recovery, guarantee or freedoms, to name but a few. Vocabulary differences shape both the opponent and the sender, urging recipients to see the sender as the sole viable option against the threat of fear. The sender presents not only the threat but also the consequences through their vocabulary; an example of this is the use of independence alongside indoctrination. Furthermore, the discourse claims this alleged indoctrination occurs mainly in schools, indirectly portraying children as vulnerable victims. Especially the positioning of children and older people as victims is a propaganda tool associated with fear (Huici, 2017).

### *Form*

The syntax used in the intervention is clear and simple (which is in line with the trend towards emotional speech, as explained by Jordan et al., 2018), with straightforward sentences that follow a two-stage argumentation scheme: (1) showing the wickedness of the others and (2) pointing out the merits of the us. There is no abrupt transition between the negative and the positive; rather, Casado first exposes the negative, affirms that it must be eliminated and/or changed, which in some ways could be described as positive, and finally ends with what the we undoubtedly constitutes (i.e., freedoms, coexistence, and concord).

I would like to turn to the Catalans who are watching us to tell them that they are not alone. After all, a party like the Popular Party, which has served Catalonia for 40 years, knows how to apply the law and, above all, how to restore prosperity. Those billion euros that Punset took away, those four

thousand companies, those broken families, those friends who no longer speak because of the pro-independence politics. To do this, we must end the indoctrination in schools, end the propaganda in the public media, ... also end the DIPLOCAT that Mr. Sánchez has reopened and, above all, meet the demand to guarantee order on the streets and also freedoms, coexistence and harmony (Casado, on RTVE, 2019c: 02:35:48).

In this passage, Casado dismisses Catalan conflict debates as futile, invoking personal ties to frame it as a personal, not just political, issue, subtly highlighting societal fragmentation tied to separatism. As for the rhetorical figures, an anaphora is identified by the repetition of those four times. Specifically, it is used to emphasize the aspects that the discourse blames on separatism, such as “These billions of euros that Punset took away, those four thousand companies” (Casado, on RTVE, 2019c: 02:36:05). The enumeration is also underlined, i.e. an argument is made with different aspects one after the other. This can be used because it gives the impression that there are a greater number of arguments in the limited time available.

Casado’s tone is serious, cordial and calm. He is even characterized by a hopeful tone with slight changes of intonation when he addresses the PP’s intentions in Catalonia. However, when he alludes to the threat that generates fear, he stretches the last syllables slightly.

### *Speech acts*

As far as the speech acts are concerned, only implicit promises such as the restoration of harmony or the dismantling of DIPLOCAT can be recognized. There are no references to negotiations with opponents in the debate. This absence does not indicate a refusal to form a government with a rival party. First, the locutionary act are the words Casado uses to describe the situation in Catalonia and illustrate a better future that can only be achieved through the PP’s policies, as detailed in the lexical study. Second, the illocutionary act is the aim of the intervention, i.e., to position the PP as the only political party that can solve the problems resulting from the conflict in Catalonia. Finally, the perlocutionary act, i.e., the effect of this message, is to convince the potential voter that there is no other alternative if they want to achieve a future in which harmony and coexistence prevail. In fact, after these elections, the PP won one more deputy in Catalonia than in the elections of April 28, 2019.

### *Visual analysis*

In the section of the debate analyzed, Pablo Casado's mode of communication lacks mainly overt visual symbols, but it is rich in conscious communicative gestures. Casado addresses the camera directly, signaling a direct appeal to Catalan

viewers that underscores his party's emphasis on the Catalan conflict. This method of breaking the fourth wall aims to convey hope and create a sense of intimacy with the audience. According to Poyatos (1994), non-verbal cues reinforce the verbal message considerably. For example, Casado begins with his hands centered and closed, which changes dramatically when he mentions forty years of service in Catalonia; he raises his hands slightly and then lowers them emphatically, reinforcing the impact of his words.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The study shows that all major political parties use fear strategically in their propaganda, with Vox in the lead with 52.8%, followed by Cs with 27.6% and the PP with 23.4%. This is in line with the specific objective (SO1) of quantifying the use of fear in political communication. These data highlight that fear is not only a widespread emotion in political rhetoric, but is also intentionally amplified to be consistent with the current sociocultural climate in the West, characterized by a pervasive culture of fear (Furedi, 2018) and the notion of a risk society (Beck, 1992). These environments influence public perceptions and reinforce feelings of vulnerability and the need for protection as citizens are constantly exposed to perceived threats (Rincón & Rey, 2008). The function of fear in this context –to make people distance themselves from perceived dangers– is closely linked to survival mechanisms, which underscores the crucial role of fear in both shaping political narratives and influencing voter behavior (Barrera-Méndez, 2010).

The analysis identifies separatism, economic crisis and terrorism as central threats in the political discourse, which are particularly emphasized by the right-wing bloc (PP, Cs and Vox). The focus on these threats is strategic and shapes the ideological profile of a party. Vox, which is characterized by Ferreira (2019) as a radical right-wing, nativist, and nationalist party, primarily uses fear, especially concerns about separatism and terrorism. According to Cárdenas and Lozano (2020), Vox portrays its opponents –who are often associated with immigration– as a threat to the homeland and traditional values, thus legitimizing fear as a political tool. This tactic risks fostering xenophobia and racism, and contributing to social polarization (Furedi, 2018). Similarly, the PP's discourse emphasizes separatism. Critical discourse analysis shows how nationalism plays a central role in their rhetoric, portraying those who are perceived as a threat to national unity as a danger to the country and family structures.

The study highlights that while political polarization is crucial, the creation of an enemy is a widespread and essential technique in fear-based political speeches (Arias, 2016). Pedro Sánchez was particularly targeted, not only by criticizing his



policies, but above all by personifying him as the enemy, according to Domenach's (2015) propaganda rule that emphasizes the need for a single, visible opponent. Discourse analysis reveals fear speech contrasting the out-group's malevolence with the in-group's virtues, fostering polarization while using the savior strategy to evoke hope (Charaudeau, 2009; Eggs, 2011). This structural approach to political messaging is consistent with broader themes of social division and identity formation (Brown, 1967; Huici, 2017).

Finally, the focus is on SO2, emphasizing how both the extent and method of the use of fear are shaped by ideology. Therefore, the RQ (are there differences between the traditional parties and the parties of the new politics in terms of the use of the feeling of fear in electoral debates?) is answered negatively, suggesting that the differences between the parties are due to ideological factors rather than age. This can be seen in the specific threats or issues mentioned when using fear.

This study explores fear in political speech as a tool of social control, emphasizing its strong societal influence as highlighted by Altheide (2017). The democratic legitimacy of the use of fear in politics, recognized as a primary emotion with profound effects (Boscoboinik, 2016), is questioned and has sparked debate among scholars such as Korstanje (2014) and Furedi (2018). Future research should compare fear tactics in bipartisanship and modern politics, highlighting persistent and emerging societal fears.

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