

## Frames of Reference for the Electoral Debates of the 2015 and 2016 General Elections in Spain: Credibility Among the Young Public

*Espainian 2015eko eta 2016ko hauteskunde orokorretako hauteskunde  
eztabaidetarako erreferentzia esparruak: hautagaien sinesgarritasuna  
gazteen artean*

Marcos de referencia para los debates electorales de las elecciones  
generales de 2015 y 2016 en España: la credibilidad de los candidatos  
entre el público joven

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**ABSTRACT:** This work describes the impact of the communicative frames employed by electoral candidates, in the credibility attributed to them by Young voters; and the role in it of two debates for the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016. Polls were revised, and descriptive analyses of both political advertising and debates were performed. To explore perceived credibility, two focus groups were conducted with young actuants. Finally, several content analyses were practiced on the tweets of the candidates, whose conflict frames got the voters tired. However, for young people, then incumbent president Mariano Rajoy looked more credible due to his naturalness.

**KEYWORDS:** Political communication; credibility; electoral campaigns; candidates; elections; content analysis.

**RESUMEN:** Este trabajo describe el impacto de los marcos comunicativos de los candidatos electorales en la credibilidad que los votantes jóvenes les atribuyen, y la influencia en ello de dos debates para las elecciones generales de 2015 y 2016. Se revisaron encuestas, practicándose análisis descriptivos de publicidad política y de los propios debates. Para explorar la credibilidad percibida, se organizaron dos grupos de discusión con actuantes jóvenes. Finalmente, se practicaron análisis de contenido sobre los tuits de los candidatos. Sus marcos de conflicto fatigaron a los votantes, aunque Mariano Rajoy resultaba más creíble entre los jóvenes por su naturalidad.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Comunicación política; credibilidad; campañas electorales; candidatos; elecciones; análisis de contenido.

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## Introduction

Political communication has to be understood as the exchange and confrontation of contents of public or political interest, which have been produced by the political system, the mediatic system, or the citizens in their role of voters (Mazzoleni, 1998: 29). It is always intentional, because the politician «only talks about a part of the reality—that in which he has an interest in standing out—, and ignores the one which he considers that does not favour his approaches» (Yanes, 2006: 62). Consequently, the members of the public receive various versions supported by different agents.

When it comes to political communication in Spain, there is much to learn by studying the general elections of 2015 December 20<sup>th</sup> and 2016 June 26<sup>th</sup>. Suddenly, a new political landscape had emerged, where the traditional bipartisanship was no longer the rule and a relevant result was expected of two new emerging parties. What is more, this scenario led to political blockage: the parties did not agree in how to form a government, something that led to the repeat of the 2015 elections six months after they had taken place. Taking the electoral debates of that time as the events of reference, this research aims to find out to what extent the generic communicative frames employed in the messages of the politicians allowed them to be perceived as credible among the young voters.

### 1. Theoretical background

In order to study political public relations for the December 2015 and June 2016 general elections, electoral debates provide spaces where the political leaders have to show that they do take care of the problems of which people are worried about; and do so in a manner that enhances their perceived credibility. In addition, nowadays, they even must pay attention to the potential conversations that arise in digital media with their publics.

#### 1.1. THE IMPACT OF ELECTORAL DEBATES

Theoretically, the electoral debate is an occasion for the candidate to show his compromise with the main issues that worry his voters. In this sense, Coleman and Moss asked the spectators about what they were looking for when they watched a debate, finding out that they were trying to watch the real person behind the politician, in a format that forced them to show themselves in a less controlled environment (2016: 11). But the most interesting aspect of Coleman and Moss's research, is how people judged credibility by what they witnessed in the debates: For example, they criticized the incoherence of politicians between what they were saying and what they had already done in the past.

In addition, consumption of electoral debates by the audience is an activity that has evolved together with the media landscape. As Alonso (2017: 15) put it, social media have contributed to democratize the information, by fostering bidirectionality in political participation, and providing the citizens with a space where they can talk about issues not considered in the public agenda. In this sense, for electoral debates, the biggest reshape has been dual-screening, a set of practices that include paying attention to both live broadcast and the activity on social media while watching the former (Vaccari, Chadwick & O’Loughlin, 2015: 1041). This phenomenon has altered the structure of communication relating to the debates, and has led to continuous efforts by politicians and journalists to steer the flow and meanings of the news about those events (Chadwick, O’Loughlin & Vaccari, 2017: 221-222). Consequently, the activity on social media needs to be taken into account when analyzing the role of debates.

## 1.2. REINFORCING ONE’S CREDIBILITY: WHAT SHOULD POLITICIANS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT?

In an environment loaded with communicative impacts, the audiences base their judgements about politicians mostly on impressions about their believability. O’Keefe (2016: 1443) equated the whole credibility concept to perceived credibility, defining it as the «judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator». But the most important researchers on credibility are Carl Hovland and his colleagues of the Yale School. Together, they described source credibility as a variable heavily reliant on the acceptance of the spokesperson by the public (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and, consequently, always as a judgement on part of the recipient. Credibility conceded to the speaker depended on his expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953).

This approach has resisted until today with very few changes. Madsen (2016: 165) described two basic elements by which to judge source credibility: on the one hand, his epistemical authority, or superior knowledge of the source on a given topic. The second element is trustworthiness, which refers to the perception of the source having the intention to say truth. Meanwhile, in the field of interpersonal communication, credibility is also related to impression management. By impression management we understand the effort of each individual to be linked to certain attributes, through the control of his visible behaviours and the information that other people receive about him (Westerman, Reno & Heuet, 2018: 527).

Van Zuydam and Hendriks (2018: 258) highlighted the role of credibility in political communication, as a key factor to understand success and failure in elections. Nowadays, digital media and information sharing have increased the number of sources that could be perceived as credible by the publics (Flanagin & Metzger, 2017: 419-420). In this sense, Milazzo and Mathes (2016: 163) detected

how the electoral candidates perceived as the most attractive ones tended to get more electoral success.

In order to enounce the main beliefs by which people build their own image about political leaders, José Luis Arceo (1993: 18) pointed at three factors: Credibility, appeal and power. Credibility contains three subfactors: The expert knowledge that the public attributes to the source; the ethical trustworthiness that the source gets credited with (comprising any perception about the real interests of his involvement in politics); and, finally, social efficacy, by which he refers to the degree by which the candidate is regarded as taking initiatives and caring about public issues. With respect to appeal, it is made up of his notoriety, his socio-demographic similarity to members of the public, and his lifestyle. As to the power factor, it comprises the capacity of the candidate for imposing his decisions, his political and economic supports and his interest in the opinion of the citizens.

### 1.3. EARNING CREDIBILITY THROUGH ISSUE-FRAMING

How can a political leader align with the interests of his potential voters? In this point, frame analysis becomes a useful tool for strategic communication. Frames of reference condition the reception of new information, such as the statements provided by a candidate during an electoral debate. The variety of conceptions about frame analysis led to the effort of Robert Entman to sum up what should be understood by 'framing' in our field:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (1993: 52)

When applying the framing theory to electoral communication, political leaders need to frame their proposals by making more salient those aspects of their arguments capable of activating the convenient schemes of interpretation about a given topic in the minds of their hypothetical voters. In order to activate their frames in the minds of the public, the candidates make use of metaphorical concepts as devices to activate this definition of the situation, helping the members of the audience to understand and discuss the issue (Brugman, Burgers & Steen, 2017: 183).

At the same time, once they have transmitted their messages, they will also have to face the previous mental schemes of said publics, as well as the media frames. It was found out that political sources with a high degree of credibility are more likely to get their frames of reference accepted by the audiences. Druckman pointed at «perceived source credibility as a prerequisite for succesful framing» (2001: 1061), at

a time when most of researchers validated almost any framing effect that they were looking for. Druckman's finding conceded to the audiences the capacity to decide which frames they would accept to negotiate with the sources, and put the credibility attributed to them as a big factor when it comes to operate within the definitions suggested by a political candidate. In addition, from a cognitive perspective, when different sources apply a process of emphasis framing in competition (as would be the case in an electoral campaign), and each one of these sources differ in the aspects that they make more salient (Gubitz, Klar, Robison & Druckman, 2018), source credibility can only become a factor that influences the systematic processing of information.

It is equally important to bear in mind the distinction between generic and specific frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996). Generic frames are «typical structures of issue specific frames» (Bruegemann, 2014: 6). Consequently, they contextualize any specific frame about a certain topic. For Semetko and Valkenburg (2000: 95-96), those structures conform five different types of generic frames: Conflict, attribution of responsibility, economic consequences, human interest and morality. In addition, they state that political parties will tend to use generic frames of conflict and responsibility, as disputes with each other are inherent to their role. We suggest that the same generic frame can be employed by an electoral candidate for a variety of key issues during his campaign.

## **2. Objectives**

Adopting as references the two main electoral debates that took place during the campaigns for 2015 December 20<sup>th</sup> and 2016 June 26<sup>th</sup> Spanish general elections, this research analyzes how the Spanish electoral candidates performed in terms of perceived credibility among young voters: which communicative frames were negotiated for that purpose, with what degree of success, and their potential influence on the mentioned target. The first debate was broadcasted on 2015 December 14<sup>th</sup>, and consisted of then-incumbent president Mariano Rajoy facing the candidate of the Socialist Party (PSOE), Pedro Sánchez. Six months later, the debate of 2016 June 13<sup>th</sup> was attended by the candidates of all four parties with serious options.

### **2.1. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

In order to delve into this topic, we have established a set of specific objectives:

- To identify which of the five main types of generic frames were employed more frequently by the politicians.
  - What role did the generic frames play in the source credibility of the candidates?

- As suggested by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), it is hypothesized that all the candidates combined the generic frames of conflict and responsibility.
- To detect the affective components of their communicative framing that, while not being directly related to the theoretical credibility subfactors, would have impacted on the degree by which the candidates were regarded as credible to the eyes of the young voters.
  - Which emotional states did the candidates try to arouse in the public in order to convince people of adopting a certain frame?
  - Our second hypothesis states that the candidates of the newest parties would have tried to differentiate from the bipartishanship by taking advantage of humour, as well as joyful and populist stances; on the contrary, Rajoy and Sánchez would have played it conservatively by expressing negative feelings such as aggressiveness, anger and fear.
- To report on how the different subfactors of source credibility were employed by the candidates as the main components of their communicative frames for young voters.
  - This research aims to find out which role was played by the credibility subfactors in the frames of the candidates.
  - Judging by the political period in which the analyzed campaigns took place, ethical trustworthiness and expert knowledge would have predominated as credibility subfactors, linked to conflict frames.
- To identify any variation in the management of the different credibility subfactors by the candidates over the analyzed periods.
  - Did the electoral debates force any change in the tactics of the candidates to be recognized as credible?
  - The associated hypothesis argues that there were no major changes in the use of credibility subfactors, as the frames of conflict and attribution of responsibility were used consistently.
- To find out which of the three credibility subfactors is appreciated the most by young voters.
  - Compared to other sources of information, what specific use does the young public give to electoral debates when judging the credibility of the candidates?; which part does the attractiveness of the candidates play in recognizing them as such?
  - The final hypothesis suggests that expert knowledge and ethical trustworthiness count more for young voters than the mere dynamism or general effectiveness, as social efficacy would be a harder aspect to assess.

- To explore the judgements that the majority of the young public shared about the expert knowledge, ethical trustworthiness and social efficacy transmitted by each of the candidates.
  - The main research question for this objective reflects on which subfactor was the strongest one for each political leader. Equally, did any particular subfactor constitute the weakest point for any of them?
  - In this regard, the hypothesis to start with is that the young voters could attribute more expert knowledge to Mariano Rajoy than to his rivals, as he could depict positively the experience accumulated as the incumbent President of the Government.

### 3. Methodology

Several quantitative and qualitative techniques were combined in the design of the study. This mixed methodology allowed to delve into the thoughts of the publics, at the same time that the messages of the political leaders were posited through the most classic content analysis approach (Berelson, 1952).

#### 3.1. REVIEW OF OPINION POLLS

The polls of two analytics institutions were analyzed: Metroscopia (the institute of reference for the most read Spanish newspaper, *El País*) and the Center for Sociological Investigations (CIS, by its initials in Spanish), as the government agency committed to publish statistics about the population. They all were published up to two months before each general election, a timeframe long enough to extract relevant tendencies about vote intention, the most worrying problems according to the respondents, and the marks conceded to political leaders.

#### 3.2. FOCUS GROUPS

In order to explore the relative weights of the three perceived credibility subfactors among young people and their judgements about the candidates, we conducted two focus groups.

All 12 actuants lived in the region of Madrid. The first group was formed by four women and one man aged 22, and a fifth woman with 19 years of age (the only person in this group who had not yet finalized her Higher Education studies). While all of them were unemployed both at the time of the last campaign analyzed (June 2016) and when the focus group was conducted, at that point two actuants were

seeking a job. Four women and two men took part in the second focus group. This time people was aged between 22 and 29 years old. Everybody had a university title, and five of them had a job at the time of the meeting. Only one woman had no professional occupation as of June 2016.

Both focus groups started with the projection of a fragment of the 2016 June 14<sup>th</sup> debate. In that segment, the candidates were asked by the moderator what they would do to avoid a second repeat of the elections, as this was a hot topic at the time, with serious fears for the long term governance as a consequence of political fragmentation.

### 3.3. DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF DEBATES AND ELECTORAL ADVERTISING

For both elections, the section about Economy and Employment of both debates; and the electoral advertising of the four main political parties —*Partido Popular* (PP), *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos*— were analyzed, including spots (Table 1) and electoral posters. The technique of the descriptive analysis (Berrocal, Redondo, Martín & Campos, 2014) allowed us to take note of a series of key components and make an interpretation of it.

We defined eight categories that suggested the presence of the different Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) generic frames:

- Fear: The candidate talked about a threat, or about how to protect people from it.
- Aggressiveness: The candidate attacked other political agents or defended himself from the attacks of someone.
- Humour: Use of irony, sarcasm or just any joke to earn a bigger appeal among his publics.
- Joyfulness: It was registered when the candidate appeared smiling or talked about putting smiles, as well as in the cases when he depicted a positive balance on a given topic.
- Anger/hate: Every time the candidate endorsed a protest, or complained about the thoughts or action of a rival.
- Lie: Any reference to false statements of the adversaries. The item was also registered when contrasted false statements appeared in the discourse of the analyzed candidate.
- Deception/sadness: Any reference to undesired and regretful events from the past. The comments which supported the idea of «change» were understood as proof of the dissatisfaction of the candidate with a given situation; consequently, they were also codified as 'deception'.



TABLE 1  
Sample of spots analyzed

	Analyzed spots
PP (2015)	«Piensa sin prejuicios» [ <i>Think without Prejudices</i> ] <a href="https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=eWA0aawA1EA">https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=eWA0aawA1EA</a>
PSOE (2015)	«Un futuro para la mayoría» [ <i>A future for the majority</i> ] <a href="https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=drlBY0vUf2w">https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=drlBY0vUf2w</a>
Podemos (2015)	«Maldita casta, bendita gente» [ <i>Damned «breed», blessed people</i> ] <a href="https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=H9TzgU4btgs">https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=H9TzgU4btgs</a>
Ciudadanos (2015)	«Una carta para Daniela» [ <i>A letter for Daniela</i> ] <a href="https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=vMhNT0AjmjU">https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=vMhNT0AjmjU</a>
PP (2016)	«Abuelas Sabias» [ <i>Wise grandmas</i> ] <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUIjMg0yju0#action=share">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUIjMg0yju0#action=share</a>
	«Albert, vota PP» [ <i>Albert, vote for PP</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/WljsYffpaiw">https://youtu.be/WljsYffpaiw</a>
	«PP: Sonrisas» [ <i>PP: Smiles</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/SGCZmeGOLbQ">https://youtu.be/SGCZmeGOLbQ</a>
	«Los 122 gatos del Partido Popular» [ <i>The 122 cats of the Popular Party</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/oUIAI2aqRRE">https://youtu.be/oUIAI2aqRRE</a>
	«Mariano Rajoy toma la palabra» [ <i>Mariano Rajoy takes the floor</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/dP4QAHL9vv8">https://youtu.be/dP4QAHL9vv8</a>
PSOE (2016)	«Un sí por el cambio» [ <i>A «yes» for the change</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/ILqyjuV8KpY">https://youtu.be/ILqyjuV8KpY</a>
	«La hora del sí» [ <i>The hour of «yes»</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/FNfDAn9RHfY">https://youtu.be/FNfDAn9RHfY</a>
Unidos Podemos (2016)	«No te quedes en casa» [ <i>Don't stay at home</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/NhIN_qQddvg">https://youtu.be/NhIN_qQddvg</a>
	«Unidos Podemos o cómo sería ganar el 26-J» [ <i>Unidos Podemos or how winning on June 26th would feel</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/uMtEKpJfvxY">https://youtu.be/uMtEKpJfvxY</a>
	«Los sillones» [ <i>The chairs</i> ] <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aU2DXhnBhzY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aU2DXhnBhzY</a>
Ciudadanos (2016)	«Héroes anónimos» [ <i>Anonymous heroes</i> ] <a href="https://youtu.be/hXZLUrslDa4">https://youtu.be/hXZLUrslDa4</a>

Source: Own work and YouTube video platform.

The concept of populism was added to this list of emotional components, and was conceptualized as any call of the candidate to the people as a community; or any reference to examples of specific situations of members of the public.

### 3.4. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TWITTER MESSAGES

To report on the use of the credibility subfactors by the candidates and its variations over time, we analyzed the tweets and retweets shared by the candidates through their accounts (@marianorajoy, @sanchezcastejon, @Pablo\_Iglesias\_ and

(@Albert\_Rivera), from 2015 December 1<sup>st</sup> to December 20<sup>th</sup>, and from 2016 May 30<sup>th</sup> to June 19<sup>th</sup> (Table 2); in other words, the two previous weeks to each of the debates of reference, and the week that followed them.

TABLE 2  
Number of tweets included in the samples for each candidate and period

	December 2015 campaign		June 2016 campaign	
	From 1st to 14th	From 15th to 20th	From May 30th to June 13th	From June 14th to 26th
Rajoy	672	208	407	367
Sánchez	433	293	454	300
Iglesias	186	71	147	48
Rivera	396	149	429	345

Source: Own work.

We focused on four of the categories registered through our codebook, corresponding to the three subfactors of credibility, plus the appeal factor:

- Expert knowledge: The category was registered when the candidate shared objective data about a topic, dismissed those provided by an adversary or talked about his own management capacities. It was also registered when the candidate spoke in a language different from Spanish.
- Ethical trustworthiness: Allusions to his own honesty or to the dishonesty of others. It includes every reference to corruption and to the acquisition of compromises, as well as every invitation to trust him.
- Social efficacy: Reasonings and explanations of proposals, political principles and initiatives already implemented; exhortations to the public to perform a certain action, or to dissuade him from doing something.
- Appeal: Presence of images of the candidate, any of his colleagues of his political party or of the crowds at events. It also comprises every reference to his lifestyle and private life. It was also codified when the candidate showed his gratefulness and when he manifested interest for the problems and opinions of the audiences.

By adding the category «attacking», we registered the intensity of the attack or negative judgment that the tweet could be launching against someone; meanwhile, when the item «defending» was coded, this meant that the candidate defended himself from previous criticism. According to our codebook, the intensity of each cate-

gory was registered in a scale from zero to 4, depending on the space or time that it occupied. Once those data were taken, we extracted the average of the presence of each item over different periods.

The Twitter messages were recovered through the Tweetdeck platform and the Cecubo Metrics system (a tool provided by an independent company specialized on social media research).

## 4. Results

As we are going to develop, most of the efforts of the candidates did not translate into young voters perceiving their credibility in the hypothesized ways.

To put the results of our research into context: in the poll conducted by the CIS center, the marks conceded to the candidates went down between the December 2015 campaign and the next one six months later, instead of arising as proof of voters valuing the efforts. The candidate of liberal-democrats *Ciudadanos*, Albert Rivera, looked like the preferred leader in both late-2015 polls, but this had completely changed for the June 2016 elections, when the candidate of the Socialist Party Pedro Sánchez and Rivera swapped positions. From then on, Sánchez became the preferred president for the majority. A closer look at the findings of the different techniques will help to shed light on the perceptions behind these raw data.

### 4.1. GENERIC FRAMES THROUGH MISINFORMATION COMPONENTS

The affective components most employed by the parties in the 2015 and 2016 campaigns did no favour to their perceived credibility. In particular, the items 'aggressiveness', 'lies' and 'anger' intensified among the four parties in June 2016, something that constitutes a clue for a tendency towards the use of conflict frames. Precisely the main difference between both campaigns is the statistical growth of the 'anger' category.

All this angry and aggressive tone should not surprise provided that, as of October 2015, corruption aroused as the topic that could influence the most the outcome of the elections. In fact, according to the Metroscopia poll of November, concerns about corruption and fraud were aroused by 40,1% of the respondents. Together, both phenomena point towards the ethical trustworthiness subfactor as an integral component of the referred conflict frames. In this sense, it is interesting to note that, according to the revised polls, the rise of descriptions of the economical and political situations as very bad, coincided with an increase in the support to *Podemos*.

Nonetheless, the generic frame of human interest was also visible in the communication of the parties, as the item ‘populism’ was strongly registered in their advertisements and interventions (with the exception of the Popular Party in December 2015 and *Ciudadanos* in June 2016), and our definition of the term implies the search for a human connection with the public. Equally, the joyfulness component in the pieces of PSOE and *Podemos* (which was a constant feature of their June 2016 campaigns) represented a first step towards transmitting more dynamism than at the previous elections. Meanwhile, as an emotional component, the use of humour was not as extended as was hypothesized, even if it shared top of the ranking in the particular case of the political ads of June 2016.

In December 2015, populism was the component registered the most times among the spots and posters of the candidates (24 codifications, which amount to a presence in 22,43% of the pieces), almost equal with ‘fear’ (which was codified a total of 23 times —21,50%—). In the materials of the Popular Party, the item ‘populism’ was only registered in one occasion, compared to the eight cases registered for PSOE, six for *Ciudadanos* and nine in the pieces of *Podemos*. Populist stances were common, like «vote for a future for the majority» (PSOE, 2015); «a country with you» (*Podemos*, 2015), or the letter to «my country» that Albert Rivera, the candidate of *Ciudadanos*, wrote in their 2015 spot.

It is interesting to point at the few defined components of misinformation registered in the pieces of PP (12 examples), compared to its rivals (37 for PSOE, 32 for *Podemos* and 26 for *Ciudadanos*). Generally, this time they all tended not to take advantage of anger in their materials as an activation tool (just four codifications —3,74 %— between all the parties for the ‘aggressiveness’ item and nine —8,41 %— for ‘anger’). By contrast, aggressiveness emerged as a constant presence in the face to face debate between Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez of December 2015 (with Sánchez calling his rival «a liar»), as were many hints of populism for both candidates.

In the materials for the 2016 campaigns, there were some clear changes of tendencies. When combining the ads of all the parties, each of the items ‘humour’ and ‘lies’ reached a presence of 22,22%; but it has to be highlighted how the component of ‘anger’ got equal with the category ‘fear’, with both registered in the 16,67 % of the analyzed pieces.

For the June 2016 campaign, PP and *Ciudadanos* tended to take advantage of the fear and anger components, apparently refusing to express joyfulness. On the contrary, the advertising efforts of Socialist Party and *Podemos* looked to be based on this last element (while it has to be conceded that this was not the case of their interventions in the debate, as shown by the data that we are going to discuss). There were white backgrounds, smiling candidates and claims like: «‘Yes’ to change» (PSOE, 2016), and «The smile of a country» (*Unidos Podemos*, 2016).

In the section of Economy and Employment of the 2016 June 14th electoral debate, populism regained the protagonism enjoyed in December 2015 (see Table 3). Populism (as defined in section 3) heads the rankings of misinformation components for three out of four candidates (with the exception of Rivera, who tended to be much more involved in manifesting anger or transmitting fear). For example, the candidate of *Unidos Podemos*, Pablo Iglesias, started one of his interventions by talking about a «great country», but only «thanks to its people», not to the government; and Sánchez alluded several times to the «working class».

TABLE 3  
Components of misinformation in the fragment of the 2016 June 14<sup>th</sup> debate

	Mariano Rajoy (PP)	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	Pablo Iglesias (Podemos)	Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos)	TOTAL
Lies	9	4	2	4	19
Populism	9	9	7	1	26
Agressiveness	2	4	3	8	17
Anger	3	7	7	10	27
Fear	5	9	4	10	28
Deception/sadness	6	0	0	2	8
Joyfulness	5	0	1	0	6
Humour	4	0	1	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>137</b>

Source: Own work.

#### 4.2. KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

180 codes were extracted from the two transcriptions through open coding, with the aid of software for qualitative analysis. Although social efficacy was the most talked credibility subfactor in the conversations, the actuants barely conceded any attribution of dynamism to the analyzed politicians. Social efficacy was closely linked by the participants to attractiveness, which was the second biggest tag (37 quotes), if the codes for parties and candidates are put aside.

37 quotes fell under the code ‘Deception with politics’, 12 quotes were organized under the code ‘New parties’, and nine were branded as ‘Tiredness’. This last code included all the allusions to a lack of confidence in the politicians, like in this sentence: «I untrust this type of events, because many times I think that someone can be a very good actor». This evidenced how the young public was fatigated by the lying, angry and aggressive components of the conflict frames. In this sense, the marks conceded by the CIS respondents to the political leaders worsened for

them all from October 2015 to June 2016; in a range from the loss of 0,2 points in Rajoy's evaluation (from 3,31 to 3,09), to the 0,8 points lost by Rivera (from 4,98 to 4,17).

There was no clear path in the 12 quotes of the actuants which were coded under the tag 'Influence of campaigns', but they did agree about the point of watching debates. The new political scenario with four big parties raised the interest of young people for this format, as it enabled them to evaluate the political leaders almost without constraints:

«You get an orientation about how they behave, you find out if you empathise with them or not, if you feel that you can trust on them... It all is more revealing than what they are saying or what they are proposing in their programmes.»

The participants tended to agree on how the electoral debates are useful to discard candidates rather than to choose the best of them, while they regarded PP and PSOE as the «same old adage». It is interesting to point out that, in October 2015, the Metroscopia poll depicted PP and PSOE as comfortably ahead of the new pretenders (*Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*). However, by November, when worries about corruption were at its highest, *Ciudadanos* had taken second position.

With respect to the judgements on the credibility of each candidate, apparently all of them lacked social efficacy. However, many participants regarded then-incumbent president and candidate of the Popular Party, Mariano Rajoy (whose own code got 75 quotes), as a sincere politician with a natural approach to his image, as in: «I look at Rajoy and he inspires me confidence, because he looks like a happy 'grandpa'». But the participants did not reach a consensus about his ethical trustworthiness because, for some actuants, he shared the blame for corruption cases within his party. He was also recognized as a candidate with a huge degree of expert knowledge, partly because of his age and partly because of his political experience. As one of the participants put it: «Rajoy is the most seasoned of them all; so, from the point of view of experience, you would trust him the most». This finding correlates with the CIS statistics of June 2016: when this institute asked which party the respondents believed that was going to win the June 2016 elections, 67,4% expected that the victory would be again for PP (a 15% more than before the December 2015 campaign).

On the contrary, those candidates with a high control of verbal and non-verbal communication were rejected as too artificial and arrogant. That was the case for the candidate of the Socialist Party, Pedro Sánchez (79 quotes in total), and the candidate of liberal-democrats *Ciudadanos*, Albert Rivera (43 quotes only). Sánchez's trustworthiness was harmed by his perceived huge ambition («he loves power»,

stated one of the comments). However, he saved a bit of his social efficacy thanks to the perceptions of him as someone who fights for his objectives. With respect to Rivera, he was depicted as an incoherent politician. He got some expert knowledge recognized, even if some people criticized a lack of practical management experience.

It is no less curious how the leader of *Podemos*, Pablo Iglesias (60 quotes), gets the same recognition about his communication skill, but he does not find his credibility damaged because of that: «as a teacher, he is more charismatic and he knows how to get on with people», said one of the actuants. Participants tended to excuse his perceived faults as the novelty of the *Podemos* party differentiated him from traditional politicians.

#### 4.3. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TWITTER ACCOUNTS

Contrary to our hypothesis about credibility subfactors, social efficacy was the most enhanced component throughout all the Twitter profiles of the candidates. This is evident in a general overview of the results of the content analysis (see Table 4). At both Twitter campaigns, all the candidates kept their social efficacy score between 2,12 and 3,17 out of 4. Judging by these results, it gets confirmed that the credibility tactics of the different candidates kept stable and independent from the debates, in spite of specific findings that we are going to share.

TABLE 4  
Average scores for credibility subfactors, in a scale from 0 up to 4 points (between brackets, the standard deviation)

	From 2015 November 30th to December 20th			From 2016 May 30th to June 20th		
	Exp. knowl.	Ethical trustworth.	Social efficacy	Exp. knowl.	Ethical trustworth.	Social efficacy
Rajoy	0,58 (1,30)	0,16 (0,75)	2,96 (1,56)	0,59 (1,30)	0,12 (0,65)	2,92 (1,52)
Sánchez	0,27 (0,96)	0,37 (1,11)	2,81 (1,61)	0,30 (0,63)	0,50 (1,23)	3,12 (1,45)
Iglesias	0,33 (0,99)	0,42 (1,13)	1,92 (1,81)	0,45 (1,20)	0,28 (0,89)	2,31 (1,80)
Rivera	0,19 (0,78)	0,19 (0,79)	2,88 (1,59)	0,12 (0,65)	0,64 (1,35)	2,80 (1,52)

Source: Own work.

Tweets coded in the ‘Social efficacy’ category were basically employed by the candidates to suggest programme proposals or to portray the various activities of the leader. But, generally speaking, the candidates also showed agility and dynamism

both to defend themselves from accusations or to attack an adversary. This is what Rajoy did on 2015 December 14th in his Twitter profile: «PSOE managed the economy disastrously. They neither admitted the crisis, nor want to see the recovery». This pays testimony to the already commented framing of the electoral messages through the generic frame of conflict.

In the tweets related to electoral debates, the averages for the items ‘Attacking’ and ‘Defending’ escalated (see Table 5). In these messages, it is revealing how Sánchez and Rivera present themselves as attacking candidates when they talk about electoral debates; meanwhile, Iglesias portrays himself as a defendant. It is also worth noting how the attacks of Sánchez coincide with a peak in the use of the ethical trustworthiness subfactor as a framing device (with a score of 2,79 out of 4).

TABLE 5  
Average scores for the items «Attacking» and «Defending» in tweets from 2015 November 30th to December 20th

	Average scores in tweets also coded in the item «debates»					Average scores overall	
	Exp. Knowl.	Ethic. Trustwor.	Social efficacy	Attack.	Defend.	Attacking	Defending
Rajoy	1,35	0,22	3,24	0,78	0,98	0,24	0,19
Sánchez	1,44	2,79	2,5	1,65	0,09	0,87	0,17
Iglesias	0,25	0,92	2,67	0	1,42	0,56	0,38
Rivera	0,10	0,16	3,10	1,25	0,14	0,48	0,34

Source: Own work.

Apart from this general tendency to base the social media strategy on social efficacy, Rajoy took advantage of his position as the incumbent president to highlight expert knowledge through social media, as he did in this tweet published on 2016 June 13th: «when I arrived to the Government 1400 jobs were being destroyed each day; today, 1500 jobs are created each day in Spain».

What is more, the presence of the category ‘Expert Knowledge’ was even higher on average in those tweets which included a clear reference to electoral debates: in Rajoy’s case, it scored 3,34 out of 4, compared to his overall score of 1,68 over the period before the electoral debate of the 2016 campaign (see Table 6).



TABLE 6  
Average scores for credibility subfactors  
(May 30<sup>th</sup>-June 13<sup>th</sup> 2016, from 0 to 4)

	Expert knowledge/ competence		Dynamism/social efficacy		Number of tweets	
	Overall score	Tweets referring to debates	Overall score	Tweets referring to debates	Total	Referring to debates
Mariano Rajoy	0.62	1.68	2.79	3.34	407	44
Pedro Sánchez	0.27	0.93	3.12	3.07	454	15
Pablo Iglesias	0.49	0.00	2.30	3.14	147	7
Albert Rivera	0.12	0.23	2.75	3.05	429	39

Source: Own work.

Equally, the category ‘Appeal’ was registered much more frequently in the sample of Pablo Iglesias’ tweets, despite social efficacy being also the most employed credibility subfactor in his messages. For example, he tried to sympathize with the publics through similitudes in hobbies. In 2016 June 17<sup>th</sup>, Iglesias published: «I’ve been sent these soccer cards of the national team. Do you know the best bit, @agarzon? Here if you get them repeated, it still sums».

It also has to be reported that his average score on appeal efforts after the debate of June 2016 (3,19) was sensibly higher than that of his adversaries, provided that neither of them reached the score of three out of four in our scale (see Table 7).

TABLE 7  
Average scores of dynamism and appeal  
(May 30<sup>th</sup>-June 20<sup>th</sup> 2016, from 0 to 4)

	Dynamism/social efficacy		Appeal		Total of tweets	
	May 30 <sup>th</sup> - June 13 <sup>th</sup>	June 14 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup>	May 30 <sup>th</sup> - June 13 <sup>th</sup>	June 14 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup>	May 30 <sup>th</sup> - June 13 <sup>th</sup>	June 14 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup>
Mariano Rajoy	2.79	3.06	2.17	2.28	407	367
Pedro Sánchez	3.12	3.13	2.21	2.23	454	300
Pablo Iglesias	2.30	2.33	2.80	3.19	147	50
Albert Rivera	2.75	2.88	2.41	2.38	429	345

Source: Own work.

With respect to ethical trustworthiness, Sánchez and Iglesias led this category for the 2015 campaign, with averages of 0,35 and 0,33 over 4 for the whole

three analyzed weeks of December, at a time when Rajoy and Rivera did not even reach 0,2. In the six following days after the face to face with Rajoy, the scores of Sánchez on ethical trustworthiness got really close to those of social efficacy in this type of tweets (see Table 8). It all contrasted to the very few mentions made by Mariano Rajoy to ethical trustworthiness (and, consequently, to corruption). However, it was Albert Rivera who made the most of it through social media in June 2016, reaching an average score of 0,64 from May 30th to June 20th. This generally low attention to ethical trustworthiness contrasts with the serious concerns about corruption and fraud in the Metroscopia poll of November, when 40,1% of respondents cited them as one of their main worries. In their poll of April 2016, 47,8% cited corruption as a big problem; this percentage was 46,7% in the CIS survey of May 2016, and even 44% still thought so as of June in the Metroscopia study.

TABLE 8  
Average scores for credibility subfactors  
(December 15<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> 2015, from 0 to 4)

	Ethical trustworthiness		Dynamism/social efficacy		Total number of tweets	
	Overall score	Tweets referring to debates	Overall score	Tweets referring to debates	Total	Referring to debates
Mariano Rajoy	0.11	0.00	3.12	3.6	208	5
Pedro Sánchez	0.50	2.23	2.72	3.0	293	13
Pablo Iglesias	0.28	0.00	1.41	4.0	71	1
Albert Rivera	0.17	0.00	3.17	3.5	149	22

Source: Own work.

## 5. Conclusions

As predicted by Valkenburg and Semetko (2000), the interventions of the different candidates and parties were mainly based on the generic frame of conflict. This frame tended to be expressed through populist stances and various forms of negative feelings related to confrontation (on average, up to four times more frequent than the components of «joyfulness» or «humour»). However, ultimately, the content analysis categories of «Attacking» and «Defending» did not reach scores strong enough to conclude that, as a generic frame, the attribution of responsibility was widely extended among the candidates. More on the contrary, through the populist stances, it was the generic frame of human interest the one which shared protagonism with the conflict frames. Consequently, our first hypothesis remains only partially validated.

Those emotional states did not distribute among the parties as expected. Especially in the June 2016 campaign, instead of the new-old axis suggested in our second hypothesis, the differences prevailed between the left and right wings. «Joyfulness» and «humour» were frequent in the materials of PSOE and *Unidos Podemos*, but not in those of PP and *Ciudadanos*.

The subfactors of source credibility played a completely different role to what was expected. Social efficacy was the cornerstone of credibility for the four candidates, leaving expert knowledge and ethical trustworthiness in a very distant place. However, Rajoy projected the subfactor of expert knowledge a bit more than his rivals, taking advantage of his position as the incumbent president. In December 2015, Pedro Sánchez was particularly prone to attack the ethical trustworthiness of the adversaries after his debate with Rajoy. However, judging by content analyses of the Twitter messages posted by the candidates, there was little change to the campaign strategies before and after the debates. The four candidates kept stable the credibility subfactors, with almost no relevant differences attributable to the debates.

With respect to the fifth objective, the associated hypothesis has to be rejected, as the debates centered in social efficacy in both focus groups. The young public feels that the electoral debates provide the best opportunity to watch the real self of the candidates, but not to decide their vote. Generally, young people untrusted the traditional bipartisanship (PP and PSOE). Talks about attractiveness were registered up to 34 times through open coding, evidencing the role played by the appeal of the person, when associated with his dynamism. In this sense, the more effort the candidate put to look credible, the more artificial, narcissist and untrustable he was perceived by the young public. This happened particularly to Pedro Sánchez, while the opposite happened with Rajoy.

With respect to the final hypothesis, we confirmed that Rajoy was regarded as the seasoned politician whose experience could be trusted on. While all the candidates seriously lacked social efficacy, at least Iglesias looked more attractive to the eyes of the participants, a finding coherent with his Twitter campaigns. Meanwhile, Sánchez and Rivera can only take some consolation from a few comments where, respectively, they were regarded as a bit more dynamic and competent than the average candidate.

To sum up, there is an imbalance between the fatigue generated by the components of lie, anger and aggressiveness in the voters (something particularly evidenced by the worsening of the marks for all candidates from one campaign to another in the opinion polls), and the constant use of the generic frame of conflict by the candidates. In order to reach a satisfactory relation with their voters, they would do better by taking a more holistic approach to all the subfactors of perceived credibility.

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