

# Elections in Spain in 2015 and 2016: the agenda debate from topics to “meta-topics”

Elecciones 2015 y 2016 en España: el debate desde los temas a los  
“meta-temas” de agenda

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This is a research paper that focuses on the Spanish General Elections of 2015 and the subsequent elections, which were held in 2016 as a result of the former ones not producing any agreements leading to the creation of a stable executive. During that period and, in particular, since 2015, politics in Spain overcame a historical two-party domination for the first time in its democracy - on the one hand, the Popular Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) - giving way to new political parties aspiring to reach national government, for example, Podemos and Ciudadanos. The main elements of the research deal with studies in agenda setting including an analysis of the Spanish public and media agendas, with a particular emphasis on political coverage. **Methodology:** A content analysis of the press has been carried out (*El Mundo* and *El País*) during the campaign period of the aforementioned elections, revealing the most significant topics on the agenda. **Results and Discussion:** The data produced by the study indicate that the problems deemed important for the country by Spanish voters have been relegated to a second tier during the electoral campaign. Leaders and different groups prefer to highlight issues linked to politics and governance called "meta-topics" in their speeches, centering on pacts, agreements and self-reference rather than the usual issues of the political agenda such as employment, health and education, among others.

**KEYWORDS:** 2015 and 2016 elections; agenda, debate; governance; two-party system; Spain.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** Este es un trabajo de investigación que se centra en las elecciones generales españolas de 2015 y en la nueva celebración de los comicios en 2016, ya que en las primeras no hubo acuerdos suficientes para la formación de un ejecutivo estable. Durante este periodo, y especialmente desde 2015, la política española superó por primera vez en el reciente periodo democrático un bipartidismo histórico, anclado en el Partido Popular (PP) y el Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), para dar paso a nuevas formaciones con opciones de gobierno nacional como fueron Podemos y Ciudadanos. Los principales elementos de la investigación conectan con los estudios de agenda-setting, en donde se ofrece un análisis de la agenda pública española y la agenda mediática, deteniéndose en la cobertura política. **Metodología:** Se ha realizado un análisis de contenido en prensa de referencia (*El Mundo* y *El País*) durante los días de campaña de las dos elecciones mencionadas que permiten visibilizar los temas más importantes de agenda. **Resultados y discusión:** Los datos ofrecidos por el estudio reflejan que los problemas que los españoles señalan como importantes para el país se ven relegados a un segundo plano durante la campaña electoral. Los líderes y las diferentes formaciones prefieren visibilizar en sus discursos temas ligados a la política y la gobernabilidad, denominados “meta-temas”, centrados en los pactos, acuerdos y automenciones frente a los temas clásicos de agenda pública como el empleo, la sanidad o la educación entre otros.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** elecciones 2015-2016; agenda; debate; gobernabilidad; bipartidismo; España.

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Translation by **Carlos Javier Rivas Quintero** (University of the Andes, Mérida, Venezuela).

### 1. Introduction: The two-party system rupture

The general elections held in 2015 and 2016, as far as they entailed the emergence of two new political parties –Podemos and Ciudadanos–, provided us a tremendous opportunity to study the construction of the agenda topics that each political force highlighted in their political speech. Not only the agenda of new figures, but also of the old ones, who were affected by the presence of the newcomers. We have considered essential, for a better comprehension of the study, to explain in detail the context of how the general elections unfolded and the chronicle of how the frustrated negotiation for governance was, which ended up with the elections repeating in 2016.

In the following pages we are going to analyze the irruption of Podemos and Ciudadanos through the analysis of one of the most important components when setting the agenda of a political party: the topics for discussion that were prioritized. Since it is not a secret that political activity is a matter of emphasis, somehow: it does not transmit the same feeling to citizens a party or candidate who includes among their government priorities the reclaiming of unity of Spain, for instance, from another that does likewise but for democratic regeneration, social justice, immigration or economy. Let’s give some examples: Partido Popular has been traditionally associated to a good economic management or to budget rigour and socialists to moderate social justice and rights equalization for minorities.

Political consulting, as a tool at the service of politicians and candidates (Maareck, 1997, p. 19), is a type of communication very sensitive to the socio-political reality in which it is applied. It must adapt to social change, modeling its speech according to the most important preferences and trends of the electorate, always focusing on the idea or image they want people to create of them through topics prioritization. In this sense, we are presenting an empirical work based on the analysis of two Spanish general elections with a field study in which the main topics or issues of Spanish people are observed, and their linkage with political speech, disseminated through the press of record of the country, within the conceptual frameworks of the agenda-setting theory.

### 1.1. Multi-party system

The interrelation guidelines established by each of the groupings of a system with the rest of political parties are important; the party competition dynamics matter when creating the image of a political group.

The Spanish two-party system collapse offers a very clear example. The main central themes linked to PP and PSOE –that had remained mostly steady since 1982- were suddenly challenged by the irruption of two new groupings with governance vocation in the 2015 elections. Podemos and Ciudadanos represented, above all, a threat to the “old politics” of *popular* and socialist partisans, and these were forced to redefine or transform, after feeling threatened.

Therefore, the 2015 and 2016 elections introduced a profound change in the way of making and demanding politics, not at all related to previous referendums: the ones of 2011 or the economic crisis elections (Colino and Cotarelo, 2012), or the ones of 2008 or the political tension elections (Balaguer and Sanz, 2010).

### 1.2. The two-party system “collapses”

Since the 1982 realignment (Caciagli, 1984; Gunther, 1986), the Spanish Party System had been marked by what we could label as an “imperfect two-party system”, as long as the popularized maxim by Sartori (2005) seems to be met, stating that the existence of third parties “does not prevent the leading ones to govern alone, that is, when coalitions are unnecessary” (Ibid. 240).

In the Spanish two-party system, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) was at the center-left and, to the center-right, Popular Alliance (AP) at first, and as of 1989 it became the current Popular Party (PP). The “imperfect” label that can be added to the system prior to 2015 has to do with the existence of the so-called “hinge parties”. They are small groupings, generally nationalists, on which the investiture of the president has depended in the lack of an absolute majority, or at least, the approval from the legislature for the most important laws or the very stability of governments.

This way, the Spanish two-party system had been characterized by the existence of two big groups that had been sharing the duties from governing. But, additionally, by all the constellation of smaller parties that have occasionally played the role of a very relevant arbitrator (Reniu, 2013). These dynamics that remained unaltered for over thirty years experienced a sudden mutation after the general elections of 2015.

### 1.3. Ciudadanos and Podemos: regeneration with different elements

Ciudadanos is, ideologically speaking, to the left of PP and to the right of PSOE. Meaning, a place that would allow them to capture the disaffection votes with both groups. Their main differentiating

proposals from “traditional politics” were related to two ideés-forces: democratic regeneration and the vindication of Spain.

The “regenerationism” of Ciudadanos gained special importance in 2015 and 2016, and lost strength with the PSOE accession to power after the motion of censure to Mariano Rajoy in June 2018. But it is a quest for regeneration (motivated by corruption) from an organized and moderate perspective of politics. This stance aimed to differentiate them from the branding and image of Podemos, the new figure that, at least in this realm, emerged as a competitor against the party of Albert Rivera. The 2015 elections can be seen as a battle to channel the disaffection votes with the two-party system.

As aforementioned, the founding concepts of Ciudadanos have impacted on the rest of groupings since the parties are interconnected within a system. The regeneration pointed at “old politics”, seen as corrupted and exhausted. PP and PSOE must have felt alluded. But this criticism also sought to set distance from the reformism that emerged to the left of PSOE, labeled by Ciudadanos as “radical populism” of leftists. This could be, broadly speaking, the image that –at least in 2015 and 2016- Ciudadanos tried to build.

If Ciudadanos went somehow unnoticed or had a low profile due to its ideological component<sup>1</sup>, Podemos, the other party that irrupted on a national scale in 2015, was perceived ideologically as a much stronger party. In this case, with very clear progressive stances; that is, to the left of socialists, in the place that had been traditionally held by the United Left (ES: Izquierda Unida | IU). However, the populist strategy set on motion by this grouping led, at that moment, by the Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón twosome, could partially explain their opponent condition of PSOE for the moderate left vote or, even, centrist vote.

Podemos did not limit themselves to play the role of a “new” IU. They intended to project a different image, a more ambitious one. On this quest, they decided to forget about the old speech and post-communist leftist communicative strategies, setting aside the emphasis placed on the working class and the social class cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 2001). Instead, they disseminated the concept of a new antagonism: the “superior class” against “people”; the “on top” or powerful ones against the average citizen.

Therefore, potential voters for Podemos were no longer delimited to the working class, the traditional target of the left, because the “the people” is indeed comprised by workers; but also by middle classes, public administration workers, unemployed, retirees or homemakers. It is the “good people” against the powerful ones, the superior corrupted political class, and the de facto economic powers. The aforementioned “regenerationist” component for the case of Ciudadanos combined with the expanded electorate that the populist politicians aspired to get. The people, the ones “bellow”, the average ones... against the “old” two party-system political elite, only caring for their own interests and the ones of the powerful: the banking sector, the Ibex 35, and the ubiquitous and conservative Germany of Ángela Merkel.

#### **1.4. Twofold battle for the electorate**

The “regenerationism” brand of Ciudadanos and Podemos –with the pro-order and anti-powerful class stances that we just analyzed- explains, at least partially, the twofold electoral competition of

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<sup>1</sup> In some occasions they have spoken about their “liberal” component, ideological label that it not part of the Spanish tradition, much more common on the left-right wing.

2015 and 2016. All of those citizens that, according to the opinion barometer from the Sociological Researches Center (CIS), considered the political class as a one of their main concerns, have found an escape valve in one of these two new groupings.

In this sense, Ciudadanos and Podemos would have acted as a type of buffer against disaffection, allowing those sectors disaffected with the two-party system performance during the economic crisis to keep participating.

The criticism of the two-party system excesses and corruption permitted the dispute over the adjacent spaces to the political center, which does not leave aside the implication of, at least, two consequences worthy of highlighting here: an increase in competitiveness and a greater difficulty in the formation of governments.

The first of these two issues seems clear. It is not the same the center being disputed by two figures (PP and PSOE) and that the other contestants relinquish their claim to it, falling into more extreme positions (Ciudadanos to the right and Podemos to the left), as these four figures –each in their own way- trying to expand their voting supporters colliding with the other members of the system.

The higher the competitiveness, the higher the possibilities of conflict, when an ideological place, and above all, a large target group of voters within it are part of the aspirations of more than one party or candidate, the battle begins. Under these circumstances, it is probable that the motives to initiate a political smear campaign increases, just as described in previous studies (Castromil, 2012). This circumstance tends to come with the feeling that political and media systems are even more polarized, with more struggles, less possibility of agreement and more fights. When, in fact, if we understand *polarization* as the distance between the two more ideologically distant parties, this one has decreased. It could be stated that, the higher the moderation, the less political polarization and the greater the chances of media negativism.

This is why candidates find the inclusion of features essential (McCombs, 2006) to clarify certain differences between them. Most of all, so that electors see the uncertainty they could find themselves in, reduced: since there it used to be two, now there are 4 contenders fighting for their electoral support, some of them newcomers.

### **1.5. Governance problem: the path to 2016**

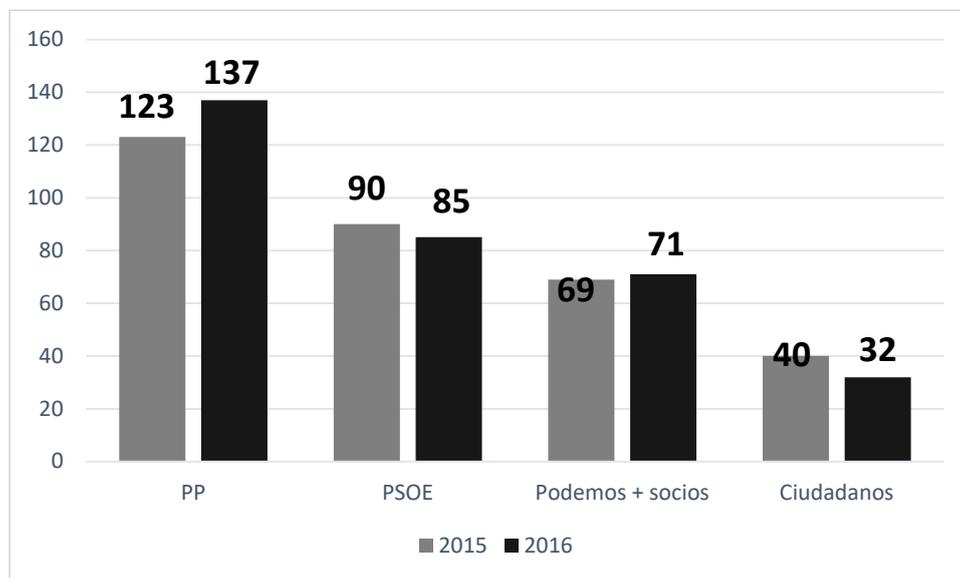
With the new figures already located on the *Carrera de San Jerónimo de Madrid* after the elections of 2015, just with a few months operating, the eleventh Legislature began. The motive was the mutual distrust that generated a dispute over the political center. A pact with a party that aspires to replace you, to destroy you –electorally- if possible, turns out to be way harder than agreeing with someone complementary to your project. A center-right and right government (or center-left and left one) seems more viable than one formed by two or more parties of different “centers”: center-right + center; center-left + center; center-right + center-left.

The legislature initiated after the elections of December 20<sup>th</sup> 2015, only lasted 188 days. The first obstruction symptom in the formation of the government was noticeable with the withdrawal of Mariano Rajoy to be part of the government of the head of the list of the most voted party in those elections, Partido Popular. The back then sitting president knew he did not have enough supporters, that the Parliament had stopped being a placid place to become an institution that would govern the political life of the country from now on. From the premise that the Executive was above the

Legislative, that the two-party system meant, we move now to the preeminence of the legislative over the executive.

The only serious intent, submitted to a voting process during the first days of March, was directed by the socialist leader Pedro Sánchez, supported by Albert Rivera, from Ciudadanos. The rejection of Podemos made impossible the investiture and turned Sánchez into the first presidential candidate of the Government to be rejected by the Lower House. The blockage situation ended up in paralysis, making the calling for elections necessary by the month of June 2016. The elections call could be understood as a new chance for citizens to confirm the parties' system rupture of 2015 or the resurgence of the two-party system.

In spite of the institutional blockage situation emerged from the Parliament's rejection of the PSOE-Ciudadanos pact and the inability of Mariano Rajoy to lead a government, things did not change much after the elections of 2016.



**Graphic 1.** *Evolution and seats allocations for the four leading parties (2015-2016).*

**Source:** Ministry of Interior.

The unsuccessful intents of forming a government, that could have caused many disaffected voters to return to the fold of PP and PSOE, did not seem to diminish the yearning for a change of the Spanish society. Instead, 2016 confirmed, essentially, what was already known in 2015: the two-party system was replaced by a more plural and competitive new dynamic that included four outstanding figures: PP, PSOE, Podemos and Ciudadanos.

### 1.6. Politics as a debate topic (meta-topics)

Yes, as mentioned before, the 2016 elections can be seen as a result of the “drawbacks” of the expanded plurality politics emerged in 2015 (ungovernable); it seems logical that the 2016 electoral campaign reflected, in one way or another, this circumstance.

It was a campaign during which the debate topics became self-referential of the very own politics, as we are about to see in the empirical study in the following pages. The mainstream media coverage

reflected, above all, the possibility or not of a single-handed government, the possible *sorpasso* of Podemos over PSOE or the most feasible pacts for a government formation.

The 2016 elections can be seen as a rather atypical consultation. During these elections, the traditional debate topics like the strike, economic problems or immigration were on a second tier against the ones we have labeled as meta-topics or debate topics that were related to the strategic calculations of the parties to form a stable government.

## 2. Theoretical framework: the agenda setting

In the previous section we have told the story of what happened during the 2015 and 2016 elections, by which the four leading parties disputed over the country's governance. As in any other democratic process, this political reality moved into the media scene where citizens were observers of their public figures, *a priori* "expectants" to know the debate initiatives to bring solutions to the problems of the Spanish people.

The media approach and disseminate informative contents offering to their audiences a media reality. As stated by Lippmann (2003), they become second-handed realities by which citizens cannot access, most of the times, directly or through their own experience to the speech of the political groupings, but they do to their media message. Therefore, Manin (1998) claims that the representation in contemporary democracies is in a process of change, from a party democracy to an audiences' democracy, with this the author highlights the importance of mediums in the very construction of realities.

The audience, seen in this study as potential voters, use the press to get informed, observing the political performance related to the current topics, especially the ones that are more relevant regarding national informative coverage. This way, just as stated by the agenda-setting postulates (McCombs, 2006), media create cognitive frameworks to guide people when deciding which are the relevant problems based on the proposed topics integrating the media agenda in its contents.

Paraphrasing the words of Cohen (1963), the press is not very successful when telling us what to think of a topic or party, but it is when establishing which are the topics to think about, associated (in terms of media) to the thematic prominence of the message of the political groupings. Therefore, media debates and, especially the ones held that are televised during the campaigns, concurrently contribute to the focusing of the speech topics of the candidates and their groupings (Conde-Vázquez, Fontenla-Pedreira and Rúas-Araújo, 2019).

The researches on agenda-setting have proven in numerous works that there is a significant correlation between the topics highlighted by mediums, compiled in the media agenda, and the ones that are in the public agenda, meaning those to be the main problems of the country or a subject context of study. Carballo, López-Escobar, and McCombs (2018) state that the agenda-setting theory is based on the analysis of the media as an influential element on the opinion of citizens and their perceptions of reality.

This theory suggests a relation function between the media agenda content and the public agenda. The success of this relation derives from the seeking of informative guidance from public opinion. Weaver (1980) explained that this guidance necessity of people has its origin in psychological factors that make people require and seek contents that allow them to be familiarized with their surroundings. Politics are an example of this situation: it is difficult to obtain information from candidates directly, since it is typical to approach to them and their proposals through media.

Following this stance, it is the press the one that prioritizes and chooses from the political message those topics that would become news content on the media pages. This common practice modifies political communication with marketing strategies with aims of positioning the partisan stances in the press. The parties have seen the media as a place for their political scene, where we can reaffirm the concept of Manin (1998). Meaning that a political communication strategies change prevails, moving from parties' democracy to audiences' democracy.

From a different perspective, there are several researches focused on political and media parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) that, for the Spanish case, undermines the democratic system, since there is a linkage between media and parliamentary groups (González, Rodríguez and Castromil, 2010). González (2008) claims that politicians seek to benefit from the press more, working to a larger extent for the media, rather than for voters or civil society.

Therefore, we can affirm that the media agenda is not only the set of topics the press identifies as relevant or as the most notable issues for the country currently, placing greater prominence or lasting periods in all types of mediums. It also incorporates the topics the very public opinion and civil society request, including the parliamentary proposals as well (Wanta and Alkazemi, 2017).

The public agenda is formed by the set of mentions that address the most important problem of a society, community or country, establishing from perception (stressing perception, since this is measurable and not reality) the most crucial topics for public opinion, demanding solutions from their political elite. Traditional agenda studies are based on the type of question introduced by Gallup<sup>2</sup>, expressed as follows: "Tell me: what is the most important problem for the country according to you?" We are going to use a similar question formula, the one presented by the Sociological Researchers Center (CIS) that will serve as a source for the monitoring of the public agenda through the monthly opinion barometers over several years.

From a perspective close to the one proposed in this article, focused on the Spanish System, there are many and varied researches that have observed the irruption of new parties in the agendas (Bosch and Durán, 2019; Lancaster, 2017). For the elections of 2015 and 2016 monitoring, there are publications that have incorporated several elements for this analysis, as the monitoring of social media (Campos-Domínguez and Calvo, 2017; Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016), gender analysis (Ferrín, Fraile and García-Albacete, 2019) or the televised representation of politicians (García de Madaraiaga, Navarro and Olmo, 2019) among others.

### **3. Methodology and agenda topics**

The main objective of this research is to reveal which are the most important topics of the public agenda and their monitoring within the message of Parties and Spanish political leaders through the media. Therefore, we consider that the advocacy or the higher or lower proposal scheme intensity of these topics becomes an identity indicator of the groupings.

This identity indicator enhances an issue within the political communication strategy and gives more prominence to some proposed topics against others that mobilize some voters more than others. The Party System rupture led to a greater political competitiveness in which the image of the parties is closely related to topics with clear strategies to attract more voters, reinforcing and modeling their ideology according to the linkage with the topics.

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<sup>2</sup> Gallup is an American company, founded in 1935 by George Gallup, linked to carrying out public opinion polls during its beginnings.

The general elections on December 20<sup>th</sup> 2015 involved news, political and civic effervescence, since it was the first time in democracy that more than two parties were competing for the electorate with real possibilities of governing, breaking the two-party system. Apart from PP and PSOE, two new parties that could be part in the government formation process, joined the political spectrum: Podemos and Ciudadanos. In spite of this, negotiations were not successful and a new election process took place in June 2016.

In this context we propose an analysis of the conventional agenda topics linked to the ones we have labeled as “meta-topics”, understood as the political debate topics associated to the strategies of the pacts, the negotiations and the very debate among the groupings to achieve a stable government. The set of issues analyzed is comprised of 15 elements that are the result of the first 10 topics of the public agenda, as gathered by the CIS during the time period under study shown in Table 1. To these issues, more topics of the very current affairs linked to the national politics were added, collected during the two weeks of campaign of both election processes, some of them were the Catalonia Independence or climate change, among others.

The study here presented introduces two research questions: 1- Which were the main topics (meta-topics) during the electoral campaigns of 2015 and 2016? 2- Which of these topics (meta-topics) were linked to each of the four Spanish parties?

These two questions led us to propose the following hypothesis: The two-party system rupture has caused printed press to prioritize the political message meta-topics on their front pages instead of the traditional agenda topics, mainly the ones established by the public agenda. During the time period analyzed in this study, newspapers highlighted on their front pages the fight, the conflict, the pacts or the negotiation for governance, putting on a second tier structural agenda topics like the strike, economy, health, terrorism or housing, that in previous elections were the main aspects of media visibility, just as stated by numerous works that analyzed the importance of topics during the previous electoral processes (Bouza and Rodríguez-Díaz, 2017; Chavero et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Díaz and Castromil, 2008).

The public agenda issues are those gathered from the CIS agenda question, formulated as follows: Which is, according to you, the main current problem in Spain?; and the second?; and the third? (SPONTANEOUS ANSWER)”. This way, the first ten main problems of Spanish people (shown in the opinion barometers previous to the elections) in December of 2015<sup>3</sup> and June 2016<sup>4</sup> were, in order of importance, the ones collected in table 1.

**Table 1:** *Spanish Public Agenda.*

TOPIC	Ranking – December 2015		RANKING – June 2016	
Strike	1 <sup>a</sup>	79,8%	1 <sup>a</sup>	76,4%
Corruption and fraud	2 <sup>a</sup>	38,8%	2 <sup>a</sup>	44,9%
Economic problems	3 <sup>a</sup>	24,4%	3 <sup>a</sup>	25,1%
Politicians in general	4 <sup>a</sup>	14,8%	4 <sup>a</sup>	21,1%
Health	5 <sup>a</sup>	11,9%	6 <sup>a</sup>	10%
Problems of social nature	6 <sup>a</sup>	11,8%	5 <sup>a</sup>	11,6%
Education	7 <sup>a</sup>	9,7%	7 <sup>a</sup>	9,7%
International terrorism	8 <sup>o</sup>	9%		

<sup>3</sup> Study n°3121, CIS Barometer of December 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Study n°3142, CIS Barometer of June 2016.

Employment quality	9 <sup>a</sup>	3,9%	8 <sup>a</sup>	4,8%
Immigration	10 <sup>a</sup>	3,8%	10 <sup>a</sup>	3,3%
Lack of Government			8 <sup>a</sup>	4,8%

**Source:** CIS. Authors' own creation.

Spanish people pointed out the strike, corruption and fraud, economic problems, politicians, health, and among others the “lack of government”, as the main problems of the country through the public agenda, in both 2015 and 2016. This indicates that politicians should focus their speech and performance on them, since they are considered priority problems by citizens. Likewise, some of these topics serve as anchors and banners for new political groupings, just as aforementioned at the beginning of this article.

Concurrently, and to monitor the political information linked to the topics and groupings through the media agenda, a content analysis in two Spanish newspapers of record with a differentiated editorial line was carried out (*El Mundo* y *El País*) during the two weeks of electoral campaigns prior to the elections held on December 20<sup>th</sup> 2015 and June 26<sup>th</sup> 2016, respectively. For this sample, the number of mentions of each of the fifteen identified topics that were linked to national politics and to the four leading parties<sup>5</sup> on the printed version front pages of both newspapers were counted from the PDFs offered by the newspapers. The total number of units for analysis was 176 headlines and front page news pieces: 88 for 2015 (46 for *El Mundo* and 42 for *El País*) and 88 for 2016 (47 for *El Mundo* and 41 for *El País*).

For the topics monitoring, we based on the analysis of the topics proposed by the Spanish people in the public agenda and their presence in the media agenda, especially linked to political topics. We have also incorporated other political concepts linked to aspects such as the development of the electoral campaign, political negotiation or governance, which we have established as meta-topics, expressed and gathered in the “political parties” category. Mainly alluding to the relations and dialog between the different groups in the Government formation, in a very novel fragmented political scene. These meta-topics, which represent the subject of negotiation of the new parliament reality, are not occasional or transitional; instead, they seem to have come to remain within the Spanish political system and are linked to the already mentioned topics, such as: government, political parties, regeneration, pacts, negotiation, proposals, discussions, teams, and others.

#### **4. Analysis and results: electoral campaign agendas**

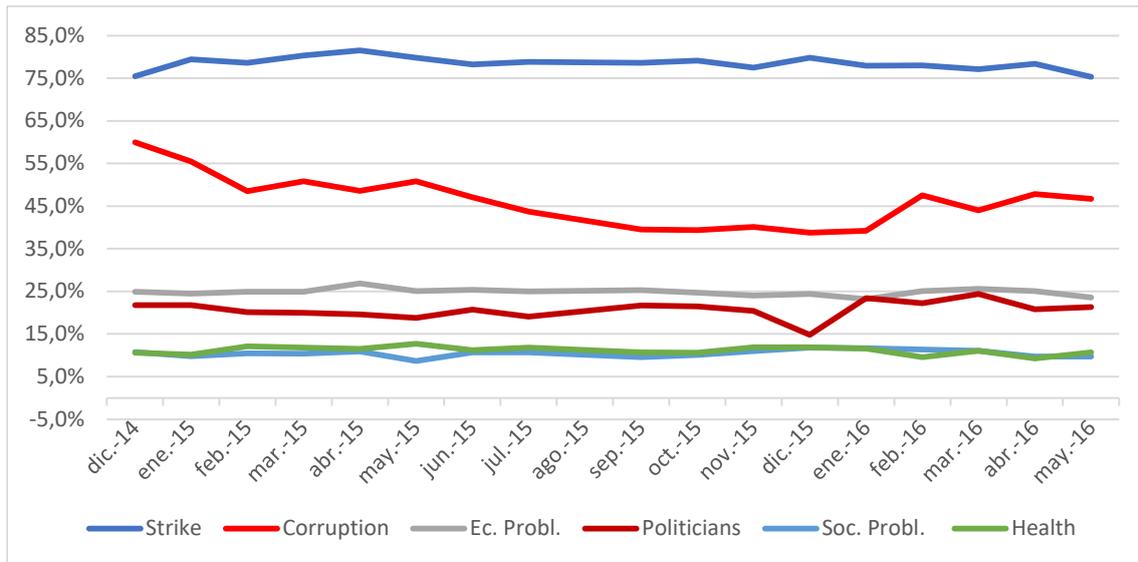
In the introductory framework, the process of how the rupture of the two-party system was explained and, in the following pages, we are going to offer some data that will help explain which the most important topics pointed out by the Spanish people were and how they evolved during the studied electoral processes.

The results of the several monthly opinion barometers from CIS offered a longitudinal vision of the priority problems for public opinion, thus creating the public agenda. In Graphic 2, the group of the first six concern topics from December 2014 to May 2016 can be seen. During this period the two elections under study in this research were held.

As shown in graphic 2, the strike or unemployment became the most prominent topic with a significant difference from the rest of public agenda topics, with percentages higher than 75%.

<sup>5</sup> Partido Popular, PSOE, Podemos y Ciudadanos.

During these months under study, corruption (from 60% to 45%) held second place with important percentages, followed by economic problems (25%). This third problem comprises a very broad aspect that agglutinates any kind of economic variable, which determines how good or bad the situations of individuals are; therefore, along with the strike, economic problems became a cornerstone of especial observation for public opinion. On a fourth place we find politicians or the political class in general (from 15% to 25%) with an important increase as of December 2015, the moment when the elections were held and a governance agreement was not achieved, which led to a new elections process in June 2016. Social problems and health (from 10% to 14%) competed to get the fifth and sixth position of the civic agenda, with a very inferior prominence compared to the rest of previous topics.



**Graphic 2.** 2014-2016 Public agenda main topics evolution.  
 Source: CIS Authors' own creation.

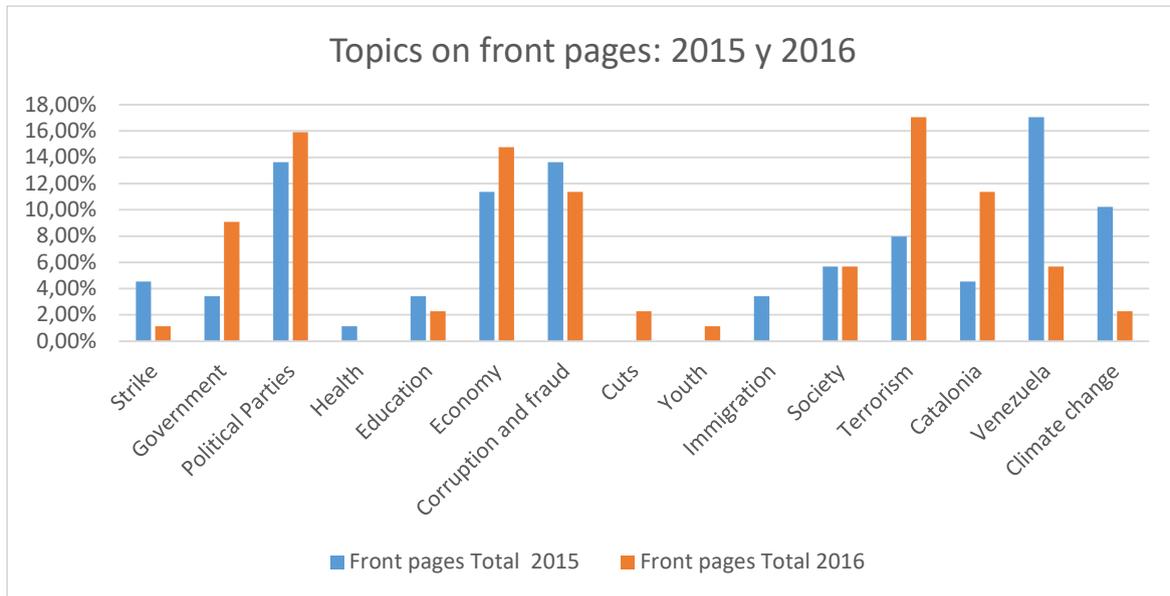
In the following graphics, the results of the content analysis of the two newspapers during the two electoral campaigns that were held from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2015 and from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2016 can be seen, during which the topics presented on their front pages became the thematic threat of the study. The monitoring of the public agenda topics and the very journalistic topics or current affairs that appeared on the front pages of *El Mundo* and *El País* during the days mentioned were taken into account. This group makes up a total of fifteen topics: Strike, Government, political parties, health, education, economy, “corruption and fraud”, cuts, youth, immigration, society, terrorism, Catalonia, Venezuela and climate change.

In the graphics we show the analysis results in which we differentiate between higher topics (those having more daily prominence during campaign in the media) and lower topics (those having less prominence), although some of them may exhibit variations depending whether it is the elections of 2015 or 2016.

This differentiation between higher and lower topics derives from them having different prominence, despite both being part of the newspapers front pages. The higher topics were positioned on the front page constantly, almost daily, during both campaigns, in comparison to the irregularity of the lower topics, with less presence in the agenda.

The topics that comprised the media agenda (graphic 3) as higher topics were: political parties, economy, corruption and fraud, terrorism and Venezuela. For lower topics were: Strike, health,

education, cuts, youth and immigration. This bifurcation between higher and lower topics clearly denotes the significance of meta-topics (more political ones) against those of the public agenda, holding the lower positions the ones that represent best the public agenda: strike, health, education, economy or cuts.



**Graphic 3.** *Main topics in the newspapers during the campaigns of 2015 and 2016.*  
**Source:** Authors' own creation.

In graphic 3, the topics that had greater informative coverage in both elections are shown. It is noticeable that during the 2015 campaign, political parties, economy, corruption and fraud, and Venezuela<sup>6</sup> were the main topics of the media agenda with allusions to the Spanish politics (to which climate change topics were added since one of the world's conferences took place during those days and terrorism, interlinked to the international affairs agenda with mentions in a national context)<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the only coinciding topics to those of the public agenda higher topics were: political parties, corruption and fraud, and economy. In this sense, we considered the political class as one of the main news topics when its appearances were linked to regeneration, pacts and future governance aspects that the groupings kept in their speech, especially introduced in the new scene, boosted by the irruption of Podemos and Ciudadanos. The Venezuelan crisis topic became a political debate for "smear campaign", with clear allusions to the previous relations of the leaders of Podemos with this country.

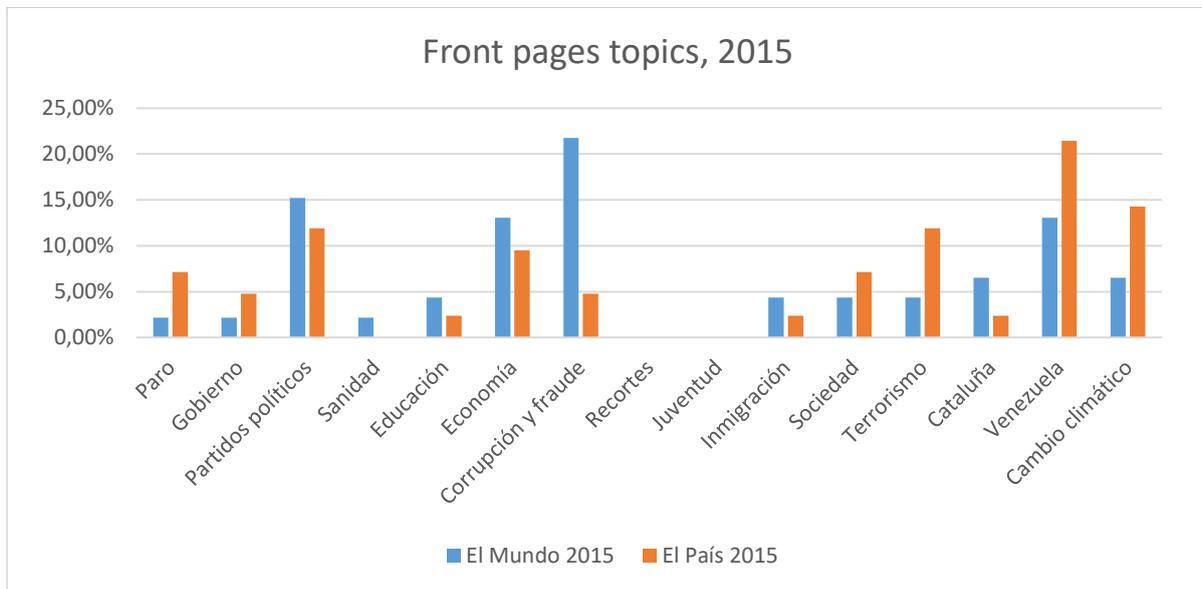
However, during the 2016 campaign the informative coverage provided a greater prominence to meta-topics compared to the 2015 elections, during which the lack of agreement promoted the presence of some of these meta-topics presented in this research, together with another political conflict, the Catalonia independence.

These elements, presented in graphic 4, show that the main media agenda topics were: political parties, economy, corruption, Government and Catalonia. To which terrorism was included as a

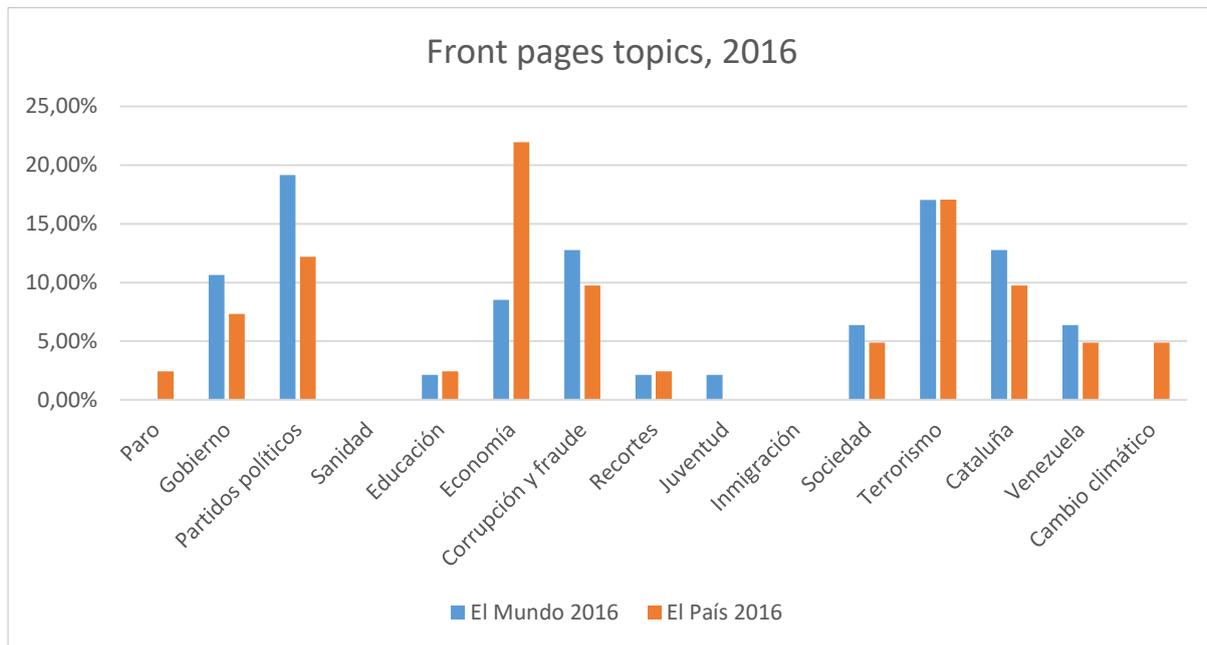
<sup>6</sup> The Venezuelan topic not only emerged from the crisis the American country is going through, but because it is associated directly to Podemos and their previous relations with Venezuelan leaders.

<sup>7</sup> Both topics were collected in the codification since they were present in the Spanish public agenda (on lower positions), but they stood out in this research analysis since they were only addressed during the political campaign in a cross-cutting manner.

notable topic, connected to international terrorism acts occurred during these days. In both, graphic 4 and graphic 5, the *El Mundo* and *El País* newspapers coverage during the electoral campaigns of 2015 and 2016 on their front pages can be seen.



**Graphic 4.** Main topics by newspapers, 2015.  
 Source: Authors' own creation.

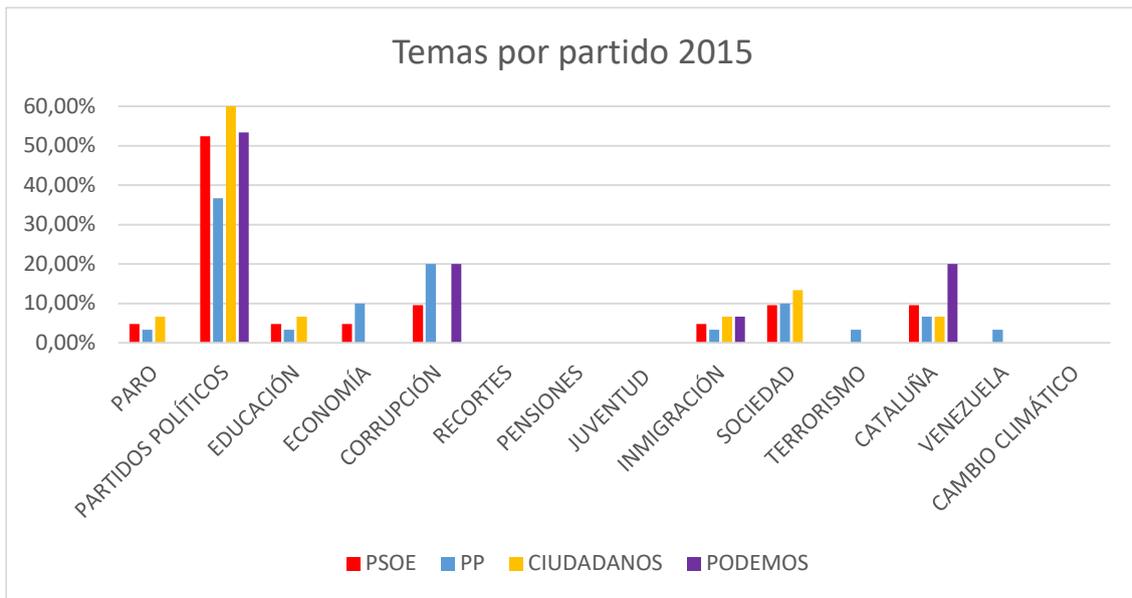


**Graphic 5.** Main topics by newspapers, 2016.  
 Source: Authors' own creation.

From a media and editorial line perspective, it can be seen in graphic 4 that during the electoral campaign of the 2015 elections, both newspapers highlighted mainly the topics linked to political confrontation and negotiation, together with economy and Venezuela. In spite of this, *El Mundo* prioritized information related to corruption and fraud on their front page while *El País* did it with

Venezuela, especially through the linkage of Podemos with Venezuelan leaders. On the other hand, during the 2016 campaign (graphic 5), topics such as political parties, economy, corruption and fraud, and Catalonia, appeared on the majority of front pages of both newspapers.

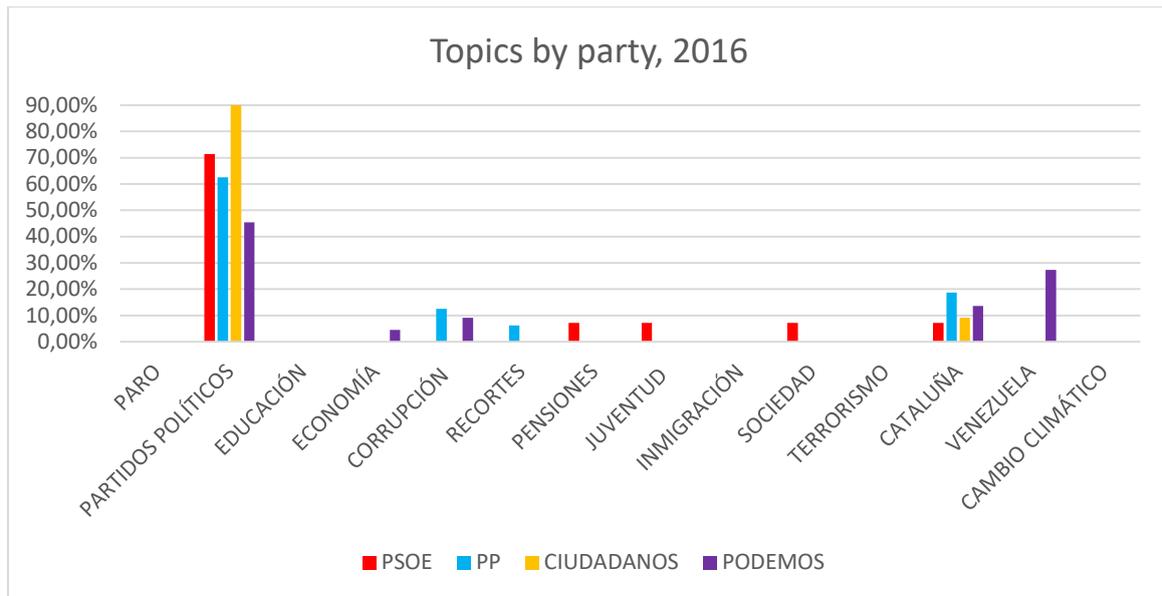
In a parallel strategy to the one presented by the press, we present in the following graphics (graphics 6 and 7) the media analysis of the topics connected directly to the parties, including to the sample only those pieces of news that clearly mentioned the name of the parties and/or their leaders. With this, the association of each topic to the four parties, with regard to their informative representation, can be seen.



**Graphic 6.** *Main topics by political party, 2015.*  
**Source:** Authors' own creation.

The topics linked to political parties (understood as meta-topics) were set as key elements during the two electoral processes, prevailing over any other informative proposal. During the 2015 campaign, they were very present in the four parties, making up from 35% (Partido Popular) to 60% (Ciudadanos) of the national political topics gathered from the press approximately.

During the 2015 elections (graphic 5), and in order of importance, corruption and fraud were on a second tier in which Partido Popular and Podemos revived this topic (for different reasons) followed by Catalonia, considered as a problem linked to the four groupings, especially to PSOE and Podemos.



**Graphic 7.** *Main topics by political party, 2016.*

**Source:** Authors' own creation.

In a similar way, as in the previous campaign, during the 2016 one, all the meta-topics components irrupted even more strongly into the realm where this conglomerating category labeled as “political parties” was the heart of the campaign. In graphic 6, the very relation between parties is noticeable, referring to possible pacts or negotiations (understood as meta-topics beyond the prevailing concerns of citizens), which continued with a lot of prominence during the 2016 elections, together with the independence of Catalonia, and Venezuela.

To any of the presented groupings, it emerged and rose as the most important and key topic for them and the Spanish governance. Negotiation, pacts, the convenience of a debate and many other elements caused the topic to be present in around 45% (Podemos) and 90% (Ciudadanos) of the mentions that newspapers made when associating the speech of the party to the topic.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Just as presented at the beginning of this study, the results proved that the main themes of the public agenda (understood as problems of the Spanish people) were not the most prominent topics to politicians during the two campaigns. Important structural problems to citizens, such as the strike, corruption and economy did not exhibit similar proportions to the presence of the political message in the media, at least on their front pages.

However, this study shows there is a media supremacy over the political topics focused on confrontation, and not much over the public agenda aspects. The meta-topics (political parties, corruption and fraud, governance, negotiation, government...) have served as the heart of the message of the political parties through the press during the period of time analyzed.

With the two-party system rupture, the results of both the elections of 2015 and 2016, confirmed the proposed hypothesis of moving from topics to meta-topics. The media prioritized conflicts between leaders, negotiations and the search for lasting programmatic agreements that would work over time. With this, the core elements of the public agenda were relegated to a second tier, as lower topics;

such as the strike, the employment scarcity, immigration or health, understood as problems that need solutions from parliamentary groups.

The topics connected to the democratic regeneration concept –criticism of the two-party system– raised during the elections analyzed, along with crisis -economic precariousness and corruption-, seem to fade within a vicious circle in which forming a government turned out to be complicated or impossible since pacts and negotiation were difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain. The Catalonia topic as a national identity was also part of the problem, entailing another obstacle in a future political management. All of this forced a constant negotiation and pacts to fail, spreading and positioning the media and political message on different levels, causing Spanish people to feel disaffected with their political class, think of them as a problem rather than managers to bring solutions for the country, especially for solving the issues of the public agenda.

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