

Populist attitudes and perceptions of public opinion and the media: A comparative correlational study between Spain and Colombia

Actitudes populistas y percepciones de la opinión pública y los medios de comunicación: Estudio correlacional comparado entre España y Colombia

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RESUMEN

Introducción: El populismo ha experimentado un crecimiento preocupante en la última década en diferentes enclaves del planeta. Este proceso, de cariz globalizador, se ha visto potenciado por las características de inmediatez, interacción y participación de las redes sociales, los cibermedios y otras plataformas digitales. En este contexto, la percepción que la juventud confiere a este tipo de fenómenos constituye un campo de estudio de gran interés para las Ciencias Sociales. Esta investigación examina las correlaciones entre las actitudes populistas, la percepción de la opinión

pública y las opiniones sobre los medios de comunicación en estudiantes de Ciencias de la Comunicación de Colombia y España. **Metodología:** A partir de un enfoque exploratorio-correlacional y un diseño cuantitativo, la presente investigación ha analizado las reflexiones y las prioridades de un grupo de n=499 estudiantes de grados y postgrados afines a Ciencias de la Comunicación de Colombia y España. **Resultados:** El estudio ha corroborado el papel protagónico que desempeñan las redes sociales en la formación de opiniones radicales, al tiempo que se detecta una caída del influjo de la televisión entre el público joven. Además, el trabajo establece que el índice de percepción de la opinión pública resulta mayor en España, mientras que el de percepción mediática o el de actitudes anti-elitistas son superiores en Colombia, y no se evidencia una clara articulación entre las actitudes populistas y una ideología política de extremos. **Conclusiones:** Las correlaciones examinadas constatan una tendencia al desapego y descrédito hacia la política en general, en especial por la población joven, que afecta a los actores y a las instituciones. Alude a la preferencia de este grupo poblacional por interactuar e informarse en las plataformas digitales y presenta actitudes populistas, sin clara identificación ideológica, pero con una clara tendencia hacia la simplificación de los mensajes, por lo que se enfatiza en la necesidad de educar la mirada crítica de la ciudadanía y de trabajar en la *media literacy* como una estrategia crucial frente al crecimiento y expansión del populismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Opinión pública; comunicación política; persuasión; medios sociales; periodismo.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Populism has experienced a worrying growth in the last decade in different locations around the world. This globalizing process has been enhanced by the immediacy, interaction, and participation of social networks, cyber media, and other digital platforms. In this context, the perception that young people give to this type of phenomena constitutes a field of study of great interest for the Social Sciences. This research examines the correlations between populist attitudes, perception of public opinion, and opinions about the media in students of Communication Sciences in Colombia and Spain. **Methods:** Based on an exploratory-correlational approach and a quantitative design, this research has analyzed the reflections and priorities of a group of n=499 undergraduate and graduate students related to Communication Sciences in Colombia and Spain. **Results:** The study has confirmed the leading role played by social networks in the formation of radical opinions while detecting a decline in the influence of television among young audiences. In addition, the study establishes that the index of public opinion perception is higher in Spain, while the index of media perception or anti-elitist attitudes is higher in Colombia, and there is no clear link between populist attitudes and a political ideology of extremes. **Conclusions:** The correlations examined note a tendency towards disaffection and discredit towards politics in general, especially by the young population, which affects actors and institutions. It alludes to the preference of this population group for interacting and informing themselves on digital platforms and presents populist attitudes, without clear ideological identification, but with a clear tendency towards simplification of messages, thus emphasizing the need to educate the critical view of citizens and to work on media literacy as a crucial strategy against the growth and expansion of populism.

KEYWORDS: Public opinion; political communication; persuasion; social media; journalism.

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

The increase in activity on social networks, especially among young audiences, has been accompanied by an outbreak of populist messages and hate manifestations (Badjatiya et al., 2017). For example, Valdez et al. (2019) have shown that 72% of the posts in Spanish on Twitter about displaced people have a negative tone and represent this group as a threat. In the field of populism, Castilla (2020) identifies that attacks on the elite are frequent in the communication strategy of various political parties, although it detects differences in the conception of this social group, as well as regarding the frequency and use of said criticisms. Likewise, del Pino and Goenechea Permisán (2020) and Romero-Rodríguez, Contreras-Pulido, and Pérez-Rodríguez (2019) warn that young people are hyper-exposed to populist and hate messages, but do not have sufficient strategies or skills to deal with them.

Although the concept of populism is not new, it has been the subject of numerous theoretical approaches in recent years. Laclau (cited by Gutiérrez, 2011) and Espí (2019) conceive it as a set of heterogeneous political currents that mobilize a large number of people from the use of emotional content that, especially, allude to identity and self-assertion as citizenry (Cervi and Tejedor, 2021). The rise and popularization of social networks and multiple digital platforms have impacted the scope of this type of message while demanding new studies on the conception that young people have of these aspects and how they interact with these issues.

The consumption of information has become a social experience (Tejedor et al., 2018), while the informative content has been transformed into portable, personalized, and participatory pieces (Matsa and Mitchell, 2014). Authors such as Shao (2009), Sheldon (2009), Quan-Hasse, A., and Young (2010), Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011), Lin and Lu (2011), Cheung et al. (2011), Baek et al. (2011), or Ruano et al. (2016), among others, have highlighted the importance that young people give to social networks to create links with users with similar interests (homophily). Various studies have influenced the ease of sharing content with other Internet users (Alhabash et al., 2012; Sharma and Verma, 2015; Chung et al., 2016), the easy access to numerous resources and accounts (Martínez and Ferraz, 2016), and the autonomy to define a personal informative diet (Kurtulus and Ozkan, 2015). They are, in short, characteristics attributable to social networks and the dynamics that they promote among their users (Yang et al., 2019).

Social networks, taking into account the floating attention of users (Liu et al.; 2018), bet on content that stands out for its brevity, dynamism, musicalization and use of colors, and impactful visual resources (Lin et al., 2017), consolidating themselves as an object of study constantly linked to young people. Piscitelli (2010), Colás et al. (2013), Bernal and Angulo (2013), and Pérez Tornero et al. (2015), among others, have warned about the preference of young people for this type of platform; even going so far as to abandon other informational spaces due to the attraction of instantaneous communication promoted by networks (Schwarz, 2011). The so-called «generation Z» or *centennials*, which groups those born from the late 1990s to 2012, has inaugurated new lines of research in the field of social networks (Manzanares, 2020).

1.1. Politics and communication

In the natural and daily exercise of a democratic political system, communication is essential. Politics involves an exchange of ideas between people in a group, where some convince others of the measures that must be taken to achieve the "common good". In this sense, Canel (1999) highlights the importance of communication. Decision-making requires information and the exchange of opinions among those who intervene, it helps the measures to be binding within the community and it allows society to organize by setting objectives, resolving conflicts, and legitimizing actions. This fusion of purposes, knowledge, and techniques derives in political communication and seeks to improve relations between the rulers and the governed, candidates and voters, strengthen leadership and power phenomena in the public function, and increase social influence (Reyes et al., 2011).

In the origins of democracy, power was exercised anonymously and ideologies stood out. At the end of the 20th century, this dynamic became more and more personalized, giving way to what Dader (1990) called the "vetetization" of politicians and the creation of a "spectacle-State", in which politicians and audiences sought that personalization to simply reflect, evade, or identify because it is easier and more natural to feel sympathy for a person than for an ideology. From the perspective that the world of ideas is abstract and involves reasoning, the figure of the leader who moves emotions was used. Added to this was the strengthening of the media as intermediaries. This process increased the passivity of the audiences to understand and apprehend what is happening in their societies.

According to Dader himself (1990), this personalization of politics brought about the "condensation of images", because political arguments and actions were reduced to created characters. In this way, a dramatic structure was configured in which the rest of the citizens, who should participate, became mere spectators. It reached such a point in political rhetoric that the political prominence of a party and its ideology was totally concentrated in the presence of a charismatic leader. The rise of the mass media diminished political activism (Maarek, 1997), "since direct participation in a party no longer entails any kind of gratification, not even psychological, when compared to the position of a simple supporter or voter, why bother volunteering?" (op. cit., p.236). Along these lines, Carey (1999) argues that, in the history of relations between the media and democracy, in the last decades of the last century a system of «democracy without citizens» was observed, giving the media a great role in this phenomenon.

In the interactions of politicians with the media, historically the former have used marketing techniques and strategies seeking to artificially create redundancy in the message by accelerating the agenda-setting effect. Maarek (1997) highlights that the media contributed the knowledge they had of the target audiences and knowing the forms of leisure of the spectators to address them, not only through newspapers that they read for work reasons, but also through magazines and other media that they used for entertainment. Content management was segmented by profiles and audience groups until the emergence of the Internet, which accelerated the co-production and distribution of information:

In commercial systems, the growing "nichification" of media audiences was supported and encouraged by the advertising market interested in targeting increasingly specialized and differentiated consumer cuts, according to social variables and consumption parameters (Turow, 1997). The Internet was the culmination of this process of fragmentation of audiences by facilitating the proliferation of content and relatively easy access to the production and distribution of content (Waisbord, 2020, p.257).

According to several authors, such as Sadiki (2018), Lazer et al. (2018), Nyilasy (2019), and Waisbord (2020), political communication today is more mediated and fragmented due to the diversity of options, compared to the modern era of mass media, when the options were more

limited. For Waisbord (2020), this media partition offers content that can be adjusted to particular political interests and identities but ends up fracturing the political and social dialogue because it reinforces sympathies, differences, and hatred.

The growing use of social networks has caused conventional media to lose the oligopoly they held in the selection, treatment, and ranking of what is a news and how it is presented and disseminated to audiences (Catalina-García et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2020). The citizen became a medium, producer, and consumer of information and is confused by the amount of information it receives in the digital ecosystem (Romero-Rodríguez and Mancinas-Chávez, 2016).

1.2. Polarization in political communication

The contemporary political exercise is characterized by polarization, understood as the identification of two perspectives that are manifested in a social division between antagonistic extremes, rigid in their positions, that require ascription to only one of them (Blanco and De la Corte, 2003). This fragmentation implies a permanent tension because "the approach and identification with a pole suppose a distancing and total rejection of the opposite position and of the people who defend it in conceptual, affective, and behavioral terms" (Villa Gómez et al., 2020, p. 19).

Several factors intervene for polarization to occur. According to Waisbord (2020), political elites are in extreme positions and do not present reasons for negotiation and consensus, in such a way that they promote division in citizens through issues that mobilize. This attitude fosters a greater polarization in the citizenry which, in turn, sustains the decisions and positions of the elites. For their part, according to Romero-Rodríguez et al. (2015) and Civila et al. (2020), polarization is the result of the exacerbation of the demonizing discourse against otherness, maximized by the media and social networks, to offer a «spectacle» based on conflict (Cervi and Tejedor, 2020).

As can be seen from the foregoing, journalism and the mainstream media also contribute to polarization because, in most cases, they do not maintain the relative impartiality and neutral ground that informational ethics imposes. Commercial and public media end up taking some partisan position, allowing themselves to be permeated by public relations practices (such as infomercials and advertorials of political parties), political information agents, political spokespersons, and advertising and propaganda teams from various non-profit institutions (Catalina -García et al., 2019). This is also deepened by the accelerated practices of current journalism that try to compete in terms of equality with the ubiquity and immediacy of the contents of social networks (Romero-Rodríguez, Tejedor, and Castillo-Abdul, 2021).

In addition to the above, the use of the social media algorithm reinforces these antagonistic attitudes (Waisbord, 2020), in which those who think differently are not recognized and listened to, but rather makes homophily prevail since the algorithm aims to generate content tailored to people's interests and affinities, but ends up creating «filter bubbles», a term coined by Pariser (2011), which is understood as digital spaces "that keep citizens in relatively ideologically closed worlds, without openness to different views, which further reinforces confirmatory biases. The bubbles supposedly operate as distributors of socio-political groupings; they are separators of people who reinforce negative and hostile ideas in front of others" (Waisbord, 2020, p 14). Within the «filter bubbles», users see what the different technological systems conclude that they want to see, and not what they have to see (Rossi, 2018), resulting in a technological bias in which users do not decide what is shown to them and they do not know the world that is outside.

1.3. Populism and polarization

Polarization hinders the necessary consensus for democratic exercise because it is sustained by conflict and tension. From this perspective, it is explained that, in an environment of polarization, in which the discontent of the people and the inequity and exclusion of minorities prevails, populism is developed.

For Waisbord (2018), populism offers a rigid vision of politics between two enemy actors: the people against the elites, the latter being the oligarchy, imperialism, the media, or foreign companies, in antagonism with the people and the charismatic and demagogic leader who seeks to end – symbolically or not– all forms of elitist control and the opposition. Obviously, the notion of "cohesive people" does not refer in this conceptual simplification to its purist definition of the set of citizens who live in a given context, but to the followers or adepts of the discursive issuer, which means that everything that does not confine to these characteristics is a political "otherness."

Mudde and Rovira (2019) argue that populism is not characterized by a founding ideology, but is nourished by other ideologies, which is why there can be both right-wing and left-wing populisms, conservative and liberal populism, which are supported by issues with great significance for the people or the majorities, such as restoring their dignity, recognition and what corresponds to them based on sovereignty, social mobilization and the political party, and pointing out the elites as corrupt and causing all evil.

In the articulation of contemporary populism with communication, Waisbord (2018) highlights that the fragmented informational ecology of traditional and digital media allowed the consolidation of messianic figures who seek to delegitimize other power groups and institutions and attract sympathizers.

1.4. The Spanish context

The *Youth, Participation, and Political Culture* survey of the Youth Institute (2017) shows that young people between 15 and 29 years of age are increasingly interested in politics in Spain: 37% state that they feel great or a lot of interest. In this sense, politics is increasingly a topic of conversation among young people and their families (63%), friends (50%), and colleagues from work or school (40%).

The distrust of political parties and representatives expressed by many young people is slightly more pronounced among supporters of new parties such as Podemos (54%) and Ciudadanos (51%), than among followers of traditional parties such as the PP (35%) and the PSOE (47%). There is also a greater difference between those young people who are ideologically located on the moderate left, students (51%), young people from the middle/low and low classes (50%), and between those who declare they have little interest in politics (56 %). This reflects the fact that one in three young people (35%) does not feel close to any party (Injuve, 2017).

The IAB *Social Networks 2020* study establishes that in Spain 87% of Internet users aged 16 to 65 (around 26 million users) use social networks. The profile of the Spanish user of social networks is at an average age of 40 years and is very similar in both sexes: 49% are men and 51% are women. The report indicates that each user uses an average of 4.5 networks. The most used networks are WhatsApp (85%), Facebook (81%), and Instagram (59%) (IAB, 2020). In concatenation with the above, Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas and Gil (2020), point out that young people are interested in political issues and that their preferred means to find out about these issues are television, internet pages, and social networks. By 2020, Vox is the political force with the most followers on social

networks linked to the young audience (Tik Tok, Youtube, and Instagram), while it loses prominence on Facebook and Twitter (Rodríguez-Rata, 2020).

1.5. The Colombian context

In the political history of Colombia, a tradition of confrontation and construction of the opponent as an enemy prevails, which facilitates the development of polarization. This is evidenced in the civil wars of the 19th century, in the confrontations between liberals and conservatives in the first half of the 20th century, and the subsequent period of violence that left 250,000 people dead between 1946 and 1957 and more than two million displaced (Molano, 1985). In 1958, a bipartisan coalition was established, called the "National Front", which functioned until 1974, and which generated another chapter in the country's violence, led by the revolutionary guerrillas and paramilitaries. Several attempts by subsequent governments to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict failed and reinforced military action to provide solutions to the country's problems (Villas et al., 2020).

During the government of President Juan Manuel Santos, efforts were made to reach a negotiation to set up a peace treaty with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - *Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP). The dialogues began in 2012 and lasted until the signing of the peace agreement on September 26th, 2016, in the city of Cartagena. At that time, citizens were kept away from the discussions that took place at the negotiating table. But after the signing of the Peace Agreement, the government chose to endorse it with a plebiscite in which citizens had to vote YES (if they supported the signing of the agreement) or NO (if they were against the agreement). During the process of socialization of the points of the agreement and in the convocation of the plebiscite, an increase in the polarization of the political discourse was evidenced, between extremes: Those of the YES, who defined themselves as being "in favor of peace", followers of the government de Santos, and those who were against "negotiating peace with terrorists", followers of former president Álvaro Uribe. The results of the consultation gave the majority to NO. Political communication in the following electoral processes has maintained the same polarization, in extremes that today are defined as the right, for the followers of President Uribe, and the rest, they are usually identified as left or independent, a name assumed by any candidate who stands as an opponent of the Uribe trend.

According to a recent study by the National Statistics Office, [DANE], 2020, it is estimated that Colombia has a population of 10,990,268 young people between the ages of 14 and 26, representing 21.8% of the total population. Regarding the political participation of young people in this country, according to this report, the population between 18 and 25 years old had the lowest participation in the last presidential elections of the country, held in 2018, compared to the other age groups. 43.8% of this population group did not vote. Among the main causes for which they did not vote, the following stand out: They failed to register their ID (38.3%); Disinterest (32%); Candidates promise and do not deliver (26.1%), and Politicians are corrupt (24.6%).

In the same survey, the ideological position associated with the age range was researched. In the group of young people, 41.3% identified with the option of the Center; 23.9% do not know/do not inform; 19.1% chose the Right, and 15.7% the Left. Regarding how they get informed about political issues, 96.5% use validated sources (television, radio, magazines or newspapers, internet, and books); while 85% use non-validated sources such as social networks, conversations with other people, and promoting messages in public spaces.

The main objective of this research is to examine the correlations between populist attitudes, the perception of public opinion, and opinions about the media in Communication Sciences students from Colombia and Spain, based on the following hypotheses (*h*):

- h1*: As a person's populist attitudes grow stronger, they will perceive greater consistency of public opinion about their own opinions.
- h2*: When a person's populist attitudes are strengthened, media reports are perceived as inconsistent with their point of view.
- h3*: As a person's populist attitudes increase, the difference between the congruence of public opinion and the hostility of the media increases.

2. Materials and method

This study is exploratory in scope and quantitative in design, insofar as it tries to approach the phenomenon of study in a primal way to discover new knowledge, without resorting to statistical inferences about the totality of the universes of both contexts under study. Far from seeking to be explanatory, the approach will be descriptive-correlational, since the objective of the research is to analyze the interrelationships that exist between populist attitudes, the perception of public opinion, and opinions about the media.

2.1. Instrument

An adaptation of the instrument by Schultz, Wirth, and Müller (2020) was carried out, containing 26 items, of which 5 were related to independent variables (country, age, sex, educational level, and medium or platform used to obtain information), while the rest were related to the hypotheses of the study, namely:

Table 1. Study dimensions with inter-judge content and construct validation

	Inter-judge value (α)	Cohen's Kappa (k)
Political perceptions		
On a scale of 1 to 5, how interested are you in politics?	4.00	.750
In politics, people sometimes speak of being "left-wing" or "right-wing". Where would you place yourself? (*)	3.50	.700
Public opinion perceptions		
My opinion about politics in my country is similar to many of the opinions of those around me and those I follow on social networks	4.25	.800
In the city where I live, most people think about the politics of my country in the same way as I do.	4.50	.800
Most people in my country think about politics the same way I do	4.75	.825
Media perceptions		
There is very little information in the media that speaks exactly what I think of the politics of my country	4.50	.750
I consider that the information coverage made by the media in my country is biased	5.00	.900
Most of the mass media report more about points of view other than mine than those that report my opinions	4.25	.750
In general, I consider that the media coverage in my country only shows what interests only one of the parties	4.75	.900
Political attitudes		
Legislators and political representatives, in general, lose contact with the people very quickly	3.75	.675
The differences between the common people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between common people	4.50	.750
People like me have no influence on what the government does or does not do	4.50	.750
Politicians talk a lot, but do very little	4.00	.800
Common people are treated like a mass	3.50	.650
Common people are good and honest	3.50	.650
Common people share the same interests and values	3.25	.725
Although the people of my country are very different from each other, when the time comes, they all think the same	4.00	.700
The people must have the final decision on the most important political issues by voting for them in referenda	4.75	.850
People should be asked every time important decisions are made	4.75	.850
The people and not the politicians are the ones who must make the most important decisions	4.50	.800
Politicians must follow the wishes of the people	4.50	.800
TOTAL	4.46	.770

Note: All dimensions were questions with a choice of answer on the Likert scale, except * which was a scale of 1- extreme left and 10- extreme right. The inter-judge valuation value was also a Likert 1-5 scale.

Source: Self-made

2.2. Participants

The instrument referred to above was applied to a total of n=511 participants, undergraduate and graduate students related to Communication Sciences (journalism, audiovisual communication, advertising and public relations, corporate communication) from Colombia and Spain. After eliminating the missing cases, the effective sample (ES) was configured by n=499.

The choice was made to work with students of Communication Sciences from Colombia and Spain due to the contemporary political context of both countries, which in the last presidential campaigns experienced a polarized political discourse that did not expire in the elections but became stronger every day. In this antagonistic construction of the story made by the different actors, characteristic elements of populist attitudes are evidenced that fragment the discussion and hinder the social dialogue necessary for the healthy exercise of democracy. In both cases, a sample with similar profiles in terms of age, gender, education, use of digital platforms, and related topics are chosen.

It was observed that there were 56.3% of Spanish respondents, compared to 43.7% of Colombians. The age distribution reflects a very high concentration among young people between 18 and 24 years old, who make up 90.6% of the sample, with $n=452$; followed by the age group 25-34 years, with 6.2%, and those from 35 to 44 of age, with 1.8% of the total. On the other hand, regarding gender, a majority of women are observed, which, with $n=336$, are equivalent to 67.3% of the sample, while 163 men represent 32.7%.

Regarding educational level, 270 people, 54.1% of the sample, stated that they had studied up to secondary education, 124 (24.8%) up to university, 83 (16.6%), had technical training, and 20 people (4%) have a master's degree.

2.3. Process

Descriptive and inferential statistical tests were carried out on the IBM SPSS package (v. 26). Mainly, Student's t-tests were performed for independent samples, bivariate correlations with Pearson's R statistic, cross tables with the Chi-square statistic (χ^2), and one-factor ANOVA tests. A multiple linear regression model was also constructed to determine the role of the independent variables as predictor variables of public opinion perception.

3. Results

First, the study established that social networks are the most common means of accessing information for 185 of the respondents (37.1%), followed by entirely digital media, with 121 cases (24.2%), the combination of print and audiovisual media (with 115 cases and 23% of the sample), and television (57 cases and 11.4%). The degree of interest in politics of the respondents is moderately high ($A=3.40$, $SD=1.058$, with a scale of 5), while the ideological trend is slightly to the left ($A=4.32$, $SD=2.124$, with a scale of 10), and the degree of political extremism was situated at values not extremely far from the center ($A=3.27$, $SD=1.465$, with a scale of 6).

3.1. General values

The public opinion perception index showed an average value of 2.75 ($SD=0.684$) and the media perception index was 3.54 ($SD=0.741$). The index of anti-elitist attitudes is the highest, with an average of 4.09 ($SD=0.648$), while the index of homogeneity and virtue of society is 2.96 ($SD=0.595$). Finally, the popular sovereignty index is at 3.75 ($SD=0.789$).

In more detail, some items should be highlighted, such as the statement "Politicians speak a lot but do very little", which, with an average of 4.35 ($SD=0.819$) is the highest, while the statement "Most of the people in my country think about politics in the same way as I do", only obtained an average of 2.46 ($SD=0.836$), being the lowest of all. Finally, an index of populist attitudes was created, composed of the index of anti-elitist attitudes, the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens, and

the index of popular sovereignty. This index gave an average of 3.60 (SD=0.476). All values can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The average value of the items for the whole sample

	N	A	SD
My opinion about politics in my country is similar to many of the opinions of those around me and those I follow on social networks	499	3.19	0.974
In the city where I live, most people think about the politics of my country in the same way as I do	499	2.60	0.963
Most people in my country think about politics the same way I do	499	2.46	0.836
Public opinion perception index	499	2.75	0.684
There is very little information in the media that speaks exactly what I think of the politics of my country	499	3.17	1.105
I consider that the information coverage made by the media in my country is biased	499	3.93	0.978
Most of the mass media report more about points of view other than mine than those that report my opinions	499	3.25	0.892
In general, I consider that the media coverage in my country only shows what interests only one of the parties	499	3.82	1.042
Media perception index	499	3.54	0.741
Legislators and political representatives in general lose contact with the people very quickly	499	4.15	0.892
The differences between the common people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between common people	499	4.23	0.891
People like me have no influence on what the government does or does not do	499	3.64	1.171
Politicians talk a lot, but do very little	499	4.35	0.819
Index of anti-elitist attitudes	499	4.09	0.648
Ordinary people are treated like a mass	499	4.35	0.820
Common people are good and honest	499	2.90	0.930
Common people share the same interests and values	499	2.30	0.997
Although the people of my country are very different from each other, when the time comes, they all think the same	499	2.30	1.026
Index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens	499	2.96	0.595
The people must have the final decision on the most important political issues by voting for them in referenda	499	3.85	1.035
People should be asked every time important decisions are made	499	3.96	1.043
The people and not the politicians are the ones who must make the most important decisions	499	3.36	1.097
Politicians must follow the wishes of the people	499	3.83	0.984
Index of popular sovereignty	499	3.75	0.789
Index of populist attitudes	499	3.60	0.476

Source: Self-made

3.2. Differences by country

Focusing on the differences between the two countries under study, Spain and Colombia, significant differences are observed in 4 of the 5 indices. Thus, it can be seen that the public opinion perception index is significantly higher in Spain (A=2.83, SD=0.639) than in Colombia (A=2.65, SD=0.726), [$t(497) = 2.903, p < 0.01, d = 0.31$]. In the rest of the cases, the opposite case is observed.

Thus, the media perception index is significantly higher in Colombia (M=3.82, SD=0.692) than in Spain (A=3.32, SD=0.706), [$t(497) = -7.824, p < 0.001, d = 0.72$]. The same happens with the index of anti-elitist attitudes, which is significantly higher in Colombia (A=4.23, SD=0.667) than in Spain

($A=3.99$, $SD=0.613$), [$t(497) = -4.259$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.37$]. Also, the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens is significantly higher in Colombia ($A=3.12$, $SD=0.640$) than in Spain ($A=2.84$, $SD=0.527$), [$t(497) = -5.383$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.48$], and the same happens with the index of populist attitudes, which is significantly higher in Colombia ($A=3.70$, $SD=0.517$) than in Spain ($A=3.52$, $SD=0.426$), [$t(416.585) = -4.062$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.38$]. The popular sovereignty index did not show significant differences between the two countries.

It should be noted that there are other differences between countries. Thus, the Spanish population is significantly younger: the age group between 18 and 24 years is more represented in Spain than in Colombia ($5.1 > 1.96$), while the age groups between 25 and 34 ($3.2 > 1.96$), between 35 and 44 ($3.4 > 1.96$), and between 45 and 54 ($2.3 > 1.96$) are more represented in Colombia than in Spain [$X^2(5) = 31.927$, $p<0.001$]. At the same time, the means used to obtain information are different between the two countries: while in Colombia print and audiovisual media are proportionally more present ($4.9 > 1.96$) and the option of "all of the above" ($2.3 > 1.96$), in Spain the use of social networks ($4.6 > 1.96$) and television ($2.8 > 1.96$) is proportionally more frequent [$X^2(5) = 49.054$, $p < 0.001$].

For its part, interest in politics is higher in Colombia ($A=3.59$, $SD=1.008$) than in Spain ($A=3.25$, $SD=1.073$), [$t(497) = -3.631$, $p<0.001$, $d = 0.33$], while the Colombian population ($A=4.70$, $SD=1.788$) seems to have an ideology significantly more to the right than the Spanish ($A=4.03$, $SD=2.314$), [$t(496.995) = -3.623$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.32$]. It is also observed that the level of political extremism is significantly higher in Spain ($A=3.65$, $SD=1.478$) than in Colombia ($A=2.79$, $SD=1.299$), [$t(489.276) = 6.922$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.62$].

Where no significant differences are observed is in the distribution by gender, nor in the level of studies, except for the proportion of people with a master's degree, significantly higher in Colombia than in Spain ($4.3 > 1.96$) [$X^2(5) = 21.963$, $p < 0.01$].

In summary, it can be seen that the indices generally have higher values in Colombia, except in the case of the public opinion perception index, which we observed earlier that follows a slightly different pattern than the rest, and which is higher in Spain. Furthermore, the differences are larger in the four cases in which Colombia surpasses Spain. Despite the existence of differences in other aspects, such as age, the type of media from which the information is obtained, interest in politics, or ideology, the effect of these issues is not decisive and there is no clear trend.

3.3. Sociodemographic differences

Given that there are several age groups with a very small number of cases, the one-way ANOVA test could not be performed, so it was decided to exploratorily establish correlations to look for potential differences derived from age. The same happened with the educational level. In this sense, the results allow us to affirm that no significant correlations were observed between these variables and the five indices analyzed, except between the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens and educational level, which are positively but weakly related [$R(499) = 0.106$, $p<0.05$]. Significant and positive correlations were indeed observed between interest in politics and the age of the respondent [$R(499) = 0.147$, $p<0.01$], and also between interest in politics and educational level [$R(499) = 0.110$, $p < 0.05$].

Given that the age group with the greatest presence is the youngest, the potential presence of differences between those under 24 years of age and those over that age was analyzed. Neither were significant differences observed in any of the indices, and significant differences were only perceived concerning interest in politics, significantly higher in people over 24 years of age ($A=3.87$,

SD=1.191) than among those under that age ($A=3.35$, $SD=1.032$), [$t(497) = -3.254$, $p<0.01$, $d=0.47$].

A Student's t-test was also carried out to compare those who have university studies with those who do not. There were hardly any significant differences, except in the homogeneity and virtue index, which is higher among those with university studies ($A=3.06$, $SD=0.634$) than among those who do not ($A=2.92$, $SD=0.575$), [$t(246.058) = -2.320$, $p<0.05$, $d=0.23$]. The same happened regarding interest in politics, higher among those with university studies ($A=3.32$, $SD=1.021$) than among those without ($A=3.58$, $SD=1.128$), [$t(497) = -2.451$, $p<0.05$, $d=0.24$].

Regarding the type of media used to consume information, the ANOVA test was also limited by the small number of cases in some categories, although it was observed that there are only significant differences concerning interest in politics [$F(8.490) = 5.002$, $p<0.001$]. Exploratorily, and given that polarization, populism, and misinformation are phenomena frequently associated with the rise of social networks as sources of information, Student's t-tests were performed to determine if there are significant differences between those who preferentially consume information from social networks and messaging and those who do it through the rest of the media. These tests did not show significant differences in any of the variables studied either.

Regarding gender, only in the public opinion perception index it was observed that women ($A=2.80$, $SD=0.647$) showed significantly higher values than men ($A=2.65$, $SD=0.746$), [$t(497) = -2.313$, $p<0.05$, $d=0.21$]. It is also observed that men ($A=3.58$, $SD=1.122$) have significantly more interest in politics than women ($A=3.31$, $SD=1.017$), [$t(294.248) = 2.543$, $p<0.05$, $d=0.25$]. Neither in the rest of the indices nor political ideology and political extremism, were there significant differences derived from gender.

3.4. Political differences

In the first place, it is worth pointing out the existence of a weak but significant correlation between interest in politics and ideology [$R(499) = -0.092$, $p<0.05$], with left-wing people being slightly more interested in politics. On the other hand, there is a positive and significant correlation between interest in politics and the degree of political extremism [$R(499) = 0.146$, $p<0.01$]. At the same time, the correlation between ideology and the degree of extremism is positive and of notable size, with ideologies further from the center among left-wing people [$R(499) = -0.659$, $p<0.001$].

Interest in politics is also positively and moderately correlated with the media perception index [$R(499) = 0.165$, $p<0.001$]. For its part, the ideological tendency is significantly correlated with the homogeneity and virtue index [$R(499) = 0.118$, $p<0.01$], higher among right-wing people, and the popular sovereignty index [$R(499) = -0.171$, $p<0.001$], higher among left-wing people. Finally, the degree of political extremism shows a significant and negative correlation with the index of homogeneity and virtue [$R(499) = -0.104$, $p<0.05$], and a significant and positive correlation with the index of popular sovereignty [$R(499) = -0.160$, $p<0.001$].

3.5. Correlations between indices

The public opinion perception index is significantly and negatively correlated with the media perception index [$R(499) = -0.143$, $p<0.01$], and positively with the homogeneity and virtue index [$R(499) = 0.166$, $p<0.001$].

The media perception index is significantly and positively correlated with the index of anti-elitist attitudes [R (499) = 0.370, p<0.001], the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens [R (499) = 0.193, p< 0.001] and the popular sovereignty index [R (499) = 0.242, p<0.001]. The index of anti-elitist attitudes is also correlated with the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens [R (499) = 0.219, p<0.001] and with the index of popular sovereignty [R (499) = 0.285, p<0.001], in both cases positively. Finally, the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens and that of popular sovereignty are significantly and positively correlated [R (499) = 0.190, p<0.001].

Therefore, it is observed that only the public opinion perception index follows a slightly different pattern, while the other four indices follow a similar pattern, although the correlations are generally of moderate or medium size.

3.6. Regression model

Finally, a multiple linear regression model was carried out (see Table 3), considering the country, age, educational level, gender, political interest, political position, degree of political extremism, populist attitudes, and media perception as predictor variables and considering the perception of public opinion as a *dependent variable*. This model was designed based on the research of Schulz, Wirth, and Müller (2018).

Table 3. Correlations between the variables that were taken into account to perform the Multiple linear regression analysis

		POP	EXT POL	ACT POP	Country	Gender	PERC MED	INT POL	ID POL	Age	EDU C
Corr.	Perception of Public Opinion	1.000	0.078	0.065	-0.129	0.103	-0.143	-0.021	0.011	-0.016	-0.067
	Political extremism	0.078	1.000	0.052	-0.292	0.043	-0.014	0.146	-0.659	0.017	-0.022
	Populist Attitudes	0.065	0.052	1.000	0.183	-0.049	0.383	-0.014	-0.052	-0.005	0.041
	Country	-0.129	-0.292	0.183	1.000	-0.058	0.331	0.161	0.155	0.205	0.066
	Gender	0.103	0.043	-0.049	-0.058	1.000	-0.034	-0.117	-0.007	-0.186	-0.032
	Media Perception	-0.143	-0.014	0.383	0.331	-0.034	1.000	0.165	0.003	0.052	0.079
	Interest in politics	-0.021	0.146	-0.014	0.161	-0.117	0.165	1.000	-0.092	0.147	0.110
	Political ideology	0.011	-0.659	-0.052	0.155	-0.007	0.003	-0.092	1.000	-0.060	0.041
	Age	-0.016	0.017	-0.005	0.205	-0.186	0.052	0.147	-0.060	1.000	0.401
	Education level	-0.067	-0.022	0.041	0.066	-0.032	0.079	0.110	0.041	0.401	1.000
Sig. (uni.)	Perception of Public Opinion	.	0.040	0.075	0.002	0.011	0.001	0.320	0.407	0.362	0.067
	Political extremism	0.040	.	0.124	0.000	0.169	0.374	0.001	0.000	0.355	0.316
	Populist Attitudes	0.075	0.124	.	0.000	0.139	0.000	0.378	0.122	0.453	0.181
	Country	0.002	0.000	0.000	.	0.096	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.069
	Gender	0.011	0.169	0.139	0.096	.	0.224	0.004	0.439	0.000	0.236
	Media Perception	0.001	0.374	0.000	0.000	0.224	.	0.000	0.475	0.123	0.040
	Interest in politics	0.320	0.001	0.378	0.000	0.004	0.000	.	0.020	0.000	0.007
	Political ideology	0.407	0.000	0.122	0.000	0.439	0.475	0.020	.	0.089	0.181
	Age	0.362	0.355	0.453	0.000	0.000	0.123	0.000	0.089	.	0.000
	Education level	0.067	0.316	0.181	0.069	0.236	0.040	0.007	0.181	0.000	.

Source: Self-made

The multiple linear regression model (Table 4) based on the predictor variables explained 5.4% of the variance of public opinion perception [$R=0.071$, adjusted $R^2=0.054$, $F(9, 498) = 4.14$, $p=0.001$). The analysis of the standardized regression coefficients shows that political intention ($\beta=0.03$, $p=0.48$), age ($\beta=0.06$, $p=0.17$), and the fact of being politically extreme ($\beta=0.10$, $p=0.10$) was not significantly associated with perceptions of public opinion. However, populist attitudes ($\beta=0.15$, $p<0.001$) and gender ($\beta=0.11$, $p<0.05$) were significantly associated with public opinion perceptions. Thus, people with populist attitudes scored higher in the public opinion perception index. The same thing happened with people of the female gender. Furthermore, it was observed that media perceptions were negatively associated with public opinion perceptions ($\beta= -0.16$, $p<0.001$). Thus, a higher index of media perception is associated with a lower index of public opinion perception.

Table 4. *Multiple linear regression model*

	Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Typical error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.126	0.312		6.821	0.000
Political extremism	0.047	0.029	0.101	1.646	0.100
Populist Attitudes	0.226	0.069	0.157	3.275	0.001
Country	-0.134	0.070	-0.097	-1.925	0.055
Gender	0.160	0.065	0.110	2.447	0.015
Media Perception	-0.155	0.046	-0.168	-3.365	0.001
Interest in politics	0.021	0.030	0.032	0.698	0.486
Political ideology	0.036	0.019	0.112	1.922	0.055
Age	0.085	0.062	0.068	1.360	0.174
Educational level	-0.059	0.034	-0.084	-1.739	0.083

Source: Self-made

On the other hand, it was evidenced that the country (Spain or Colombia), the political orientation, and the educational level, were associated in a tendency way with the perceptions of public opinion. Thus, the people of Spain had higher values in this perception than those of Colombia ($\beta= -0.097$, $p=0.055$). Similarly, those more right-wing people have higher values in the public opinion perception index ($\beta=0.11$, $p=0.055$). And the same happens with those people with less educational level ($\beta= -0.08$, $p=0.08$).

4. Discussion

The study confirms the preferences of young people for social platforms, in their training and interaction with the political agenda, as has been pointed out by various studies such as those by Piscitelli (2010), Schwarz (2011), Colás et al. (2013), Bernal and Angulo (2013), or Tejedor et al. (2018), among others. However, the study identifies differences derived from the socio-cultural and socio-economic context that, in the Colombian case, for example, promotes the use of print and audiovisual media, compared to Spanish users who prefer to use social networks and television. This data, therefore, invites monitoring of trends in the use preferences of young people together with the impact of the contextual factor, taking into account the predominance of digital platforms, as pointed out by Catalina-García et al. (2019).

The value achieved by the index of populist attitudes, composed of the index of anti-elitist attitudes, the index of homogeneity and virtue of citizens, and the index of popular sovereignty, reached an average of 3.60 (SD=0.476), an aspect that invites to reflect on whether there is a terminological consensus around the scope of this concept beyond the general lines pointed out by Gutiérrez (2011) and Espí (2019).

This aspect is linked to the absence of notable divergences in the distribution by gender or educational level. In Colombia, the indices generally have higher values, as is the case with the indices of anti-elitist attitudes and media perception, which may be related to the problems of social inequity that are manifested in the country's population and that young people do not see reflected in the agenda of the media or the discourse of the elites. As stated by Waisbord (2020), the media partition that occurs on digital platforms allows content adjusted to particular political interests but ends up reinforcing sympathies, differences, and hatred that impede social dialogue. The only index in which Spain obtained a higher value was the perception of public opinion.

The existence of a weak but significant correlation between interest in politics and the ideology with which they identify is related to the postulates of Sadiki (2018), Lazer et al. (2018), Nyilasy (2019), and Waisbord (2020), because they allude to the mediatization and fragmentation of political communication, which results in the discursive creation of social polarization. The finding that left-wing people are more interested in politics reinforces the trend identified by Injuve (2017), which pointed out a difference between those young people who ideologically self-identify as the moderate left in Spain.

Faced with the trend of certain actors, as pointed out by Waisbord (2020), who seek to attract supporters by delegitimizing other power groups and institutions, the study detects the importance of a growing commitment to media literacy (Pérez Tornero et al., 2015). This aspect connects with one of the results of the study that identifies how interest in politics is also positively and moderately correlated with the index of media perception. Therefore, the need to "educate the critical gaze" of citizens towards the activity and subjects of political life arises.

Although the main differences derive from the respondent's country, this is not really the most determining variable in predicting the perception of public opinion. The rest of the variables have not yielded more than some specific differences and it cannot be said that there is a clear trend in any direction, neither by interest, extremism, or ideology nor concerning sociodemographic variables. Regarding age, the means used to obtain information, and the educational level, the sample prevents the use of ANOVA, which would be the most useful, but different alternatives have been used and in no case have great differences been observed.

There are correlations between the different indices, demonstrating their close interconnection, and demonstrating that those who have populist attitudes often have them in different dimensions and that their perception of the media and public opinion is related to these attitudes. This is visible not only in the correlations but also in the regression model, in which populist attitudes and media perception are the most influential variables. However, it is striking that media perception does so in the opposite direction, as was also the case with the correlation between both indices. This result can be explained because the items of the public opinion perception index are constructed with positive statements about the degree of agreement with other people, while the media perception index is constructed with negative statements about the degree of disagreement with the media.

There is no clear articulation between populist attitudes and an extreme political ideology and this corroborates what Mudde and Rovira (2019) explain about populism, which is not characterized by a founding ideology but is nourished by other lines of thought, criticism, polarization, and conflict.

5. Conclusions

The work addresses a topic of increasing relevance that demands continued work from the academy to analyze the motivations, dynamics, and perceptions that young people, in the Ibero-American context as a whole, develop on the political scene. In the framework of a globalized society, the comparative study between similar age groups located in different socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts can provide reflections of great value in the conceptualization, categorization, and, ultimately, the study of political, media, and public opinion perceptions, and, in general, the political attitudes of today's youth and future generations.

The results of the study made it possible to achieve the proposed objective of examining the correlations between populist attitudes, the perception of public opinion, and opinions about the media in Communication Sciences students from Colombia and Spain. According to the analysis carried out, the raised hypotheses were answered: if the populist attitudes of a person become stronger, they will not necessarily perceive greater congruence of public opinion about their own opinions, the index showed the opposite in both countries, the index is higher in the results of Spain. Likewise, it is evident that when a person's populist attitudes are strengthened, they perceive the information in the media as inconsistent with their point of view. And finally, increasing a person's populist attitudes also increases the difference between the consistency of public opinion and the hostility of the media.

When relating the information obtained with the data from the Spanish and Colombian context on the participation and political information of young people, a tendency to detachment and discredit of the young population is observed in the face of the political facet. The weight of the statement highlighted in this study that questioned the lack of action by politicians in the face of their excessive use of rhetoric ("Politicians speak a lot, but do very little") alludes to political actors, but it equally affects the institutions. The differences between Spain and Colombia, in some results, denote the weight that certain aspects have in the topicalization of the processes and the projection of political life among citizens. For example, the fact that the public opinion perception index is significantly higher in Spain than in Colombia, while the media perception index or anti-elitist attitudes are slightly higher in Colombia.

On the one hand, the research affects the leading role that the media ecosystem has in the interaction between citizens, especially younger profiles, and political life. In this sense, the study emphasizes the need to develop new works around the role of digital media versus print and audiovisual media, whose importance continues to be perceptible, especially in Latin America. The fall of television, however, would invite the development of a study around the suitability of redefining more innovative formats and proposals for an audience that gets informed and interacts about politics through screens connected to cyberspace.

From the model of the three dimensions of populist attitudes of Schultz, Wirth, and Müller (2020) it is possible to quantify each one of the issues of populist attitudes and their correlation, but it would be pertinent in future studies to deepen on political participation, trust in the institutions of the democratic system, and the referents, influencers, and prescribers to whom Communication students go to obtain information and establish an opinion on the political affairs of both countries. This would allow crossing the dimensions of perceptions and citizen participation. Likewise, corroborate

this model with students from other professions from the same countries to evaluate changes in media and opinion perceptions according to professional training.

The study carried out allows us to conclude that social networks are a decisive element in this type of research and, in this line, they delve into the importance of promoting interdisciplinary work that allows identifying and analyzing the links between the communicative aspects and the vision of citizens in the political arena. Concerning this aspect, media literacy constitutes an element of crucial importance.

6. References

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