



THE PARADOX OF DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: THEMATIC ALIGNMENT, CITIZEN INTERACTION AND VOTING IN SPAIN AND COSTA RICA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study conducts a comparative analysis of the relationship between voters' interests, content posted by political parties on Facebook, the interaction generated, and election results in Spain and Costa Rica. The main objective is to determine whether there is thematic overlap between the content of the posts and the interests identified through pre- and post-election surveys, and how this affects interaction levels and election results. **Methodology:** The study is exploratory and descriptive. Priority topics are identified through survey analysis; posts from a sample of political parties are coded and quantitatively analyzed; and thematic alignment is measured. Statistical analyses of correlation and linear regression are applied to examine the relationship between thematic alignment, engagement, and election results. **Results:** In Costa Rica, during the election period, a positive correlation is observed between thematic alignment and engagement. However, in the post-election period, for some parties, this relationship becomes inconsistent or even negative. In Spain, the overall correlation is practically nonexistent or negative: parties with greater thematic alignment do not necessarily achieve higher engagement. **Discussion:** No direct and consistent relationship was found between the engagement generated and election results in either country, suggesting that other contextual and strategic factors influence voter behavior. **Conclusions:** The effectiveness of the digital strategy depends on a combination of thematic alignment, political context, and the specific dynamics of each country and period.

Keywords: thematic alignment; election campaign; digital communication; political communication; engagement; Facebook; social media; voting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political communication, like communication in general, is undergoing a complete evolution from a mass, controlled model that aims to inform in a unidirectional way, to a multimedia and multidirectional one (Berrocal et al., 2014). The main characteristic of this new communication model is the active participation of citizens on the same digital platforms where they seek information and references about political parties to help them in their decision-making process regarding which party to vote for (Altamirano-Benítez et al., 2022). As Blasco-Duatis et al. (2018) point out, political communication evolves towards a bidirectional, participatory, voluntary and committed model, in which the citizen is the one who controls and determines the communication processes, making him the authentic and only protagonist (Nafría, 2008) and a key element, whose deep knowledge—sociodemographic and psychographic profile—is indispensable for the achievement of the communication objectives, in this case, of the political parties (Saeed & Ilkhanizadeh, 2021).

The evolution described was emphasized by the arrival of the Web 2.0 model and one of its main exponents: social networks (Moreno-Cabanillas & Castellero-Ostio, 2023). Thus, the traditional media ecosystem is now joined by a wide variety of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. (Caldevilla Domínguez et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2018) that require political parties to transcend the traditional unidirectional political discourse towards models based on interaction and thematic depth characteristic of new media (Caldevilla Domínguez et al., 2019; Machado Flores & Capdevilla Gómez, 2016).

Furthermore, depending on their very nature, the effectiveness and efficiency of these models fundamentally depend on the ability to determine the real interests of the users to whom the communication is directed (von Nostitz et al., 2024). This determination is critical, since interaction and, consequently, the level of engagement—a common objective of digital communication for all types of organizations—seem to depend on it (Bustos Díaz & Ruiz del Olmo, 2021; Fernández Gómez et al., 2026). On the other hand, in general terms, organizations assume that high interaction is a direct predictor of conversion into a tangible action (Carchi-

Maurat et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2025). In this regard, it is worth considering that personalization and content relevance (thematic alignment) are levers that drive intention to execution (Mukherjee, 2020; Osorio Andrade et al., 2026). Based on this, the premise is established that the level of engagement achieved on social media consistently leads to practical action, whether in the digital sphere (interaction) or in the real world (voting).

In this context, thematic alignment, which drives engagement, is not only a digital performance metric but also a determining factor with a significant and measurable impact on electoral results (votes). This causal relationship between thematic alignment, interaction, and voting is precisely the subject of this study, as recent literature suggests the existence of a conversion gap, where a high level of interaction or engagement can be a niche phenomenon or superficial support that does not translate into tangible electoral support (Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020). Consequently, the objective of this research is to verify whether, in the field of political communication, thematic alignment drives engagement and has a significant impact on electoral results (votes). To this end, the following hypothesis is formulated: Political parties that align their Facebook posts with topics of interest to citizens (thematic alignment) generate greater interaction on their profiles and obtain better electoral results. For empirical testing, a comparative study between Costa Rica and Spain is proposed. Both countries demonstrate widespread use of social media in political communication, with Facebook playing a particularly prominent role (Carazo Barrantes et al., 2021; Bustos Díaz & Ruiz del Olmo, 2021), especially during election campaigns. Furthermore, it has been observed that political parties and representatives in both countries tend to use social media primarily to disseminate electoral propaganda and distribute multimedia content from their campaign events, rather than fostering direct interaction with citizens (Carazo Barrantes et al., 2021; Bustos Díaz & Ruiz del Olmo, 2021; Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020). This research aims to determine whether this is related to a limited incorporation of user interests into the content of their posts. A comparison of the two countries provides an opportunity to analyze how two democracies with different contexts—but with similarities in their use of social media and the evolution of their political systems—face common challenges in terms of digital political communication. Studying these dynamics can offer valuable insights into the impact of social media on democratic processes and political communication strategies in the digital age.

2. OBJECTIVES

Based on the above, the main objective is established as: to analyze the relationship between the topics of interest of citizens identified in surveys, the content published by political parties on Facebook, the interaction generated by these publications and the electoral results.

Its achievement and the consequent verification, or not, of the proposed hypothesis requires a series of tactical objectives:

- O.1. To identify the topics of greatest interest to citizens through surveys.
- O.2. To analyze the content of Facebook posts from political parties.
- O.3. To measure the level of alignment between the topics of interest to citizens and the content published by political parties on Facebook during the periods (thematic alignment).
- O.4. To quantify the interaction generated by the publications of political parties on Facebook.
- O.5. To compare the interaction generated with the degree of thematic alignment of their Facebook posts.

- O.6. To compare the electoral results of political parties with the degree of thematic alignment of their Facebook posts.

3. METHODOLOGY

The stated hypothesis and objectives determine an exploratory and descriptive methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques, allowing for a thorough and rigorous analysis of the data (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). This approach allows for the formulation and testing of hypotheses, strengthens the credibility and validity of the findings, and broadens their understanding (Chaves-Montero, 2018). Table 1 details the phases and techniques of the study applied.

Table 1. *Phase-by-Phase Description of the Research Methodology and Techniques*

PHASE	TECHNIQUE	DESCRIPTION
1. Identifying the interests of the voters	Comparative content analysis and thematic categorization (thematic alignment),	Using language processing techniques to categorize and analyze citizens' interests based on surveys conducted by the Center for Sociological Research (CIS) (2023a, 2023b) and CIEP-UCR (Unidad de Opinión Pública et al., 2021, 2022).
2. Comparative analysis Spain vs. Costa Rica	Quantitative content analysis	– Development of a quantitative content analysis framework for Facebook based on previous studies (Acosta, 2019; Castro Martínez & Díaz Morilla, 2021; Gamir-Ríos, 2021; Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020; Moreno Tostado & Arriaga Ornelas, 2019; Rodríguez Fidalgo et al., 2019; Osorio Andrade et al., 2026). – Integration of interests extracted from the survey analysis through triple coding and calculation of Fleiss's Kappa coefficient (degree of agreement). – Content analysis of posts. – Measurement of post engagement according to a validated formula (Martínez-Sala & Segarra-Saavedra, 2020).
	Quantitative analysis	Identification and analysis of election results.
	Quantitative comparative analysis	Comparative evaluation of whether parties are responding to citizens' interests (thematic alignment) and the level of engagement.
	Pearson correlation model	Impact of thematic alignment on interaction.
	Simple linear regression model	Impact of thematic alignment on election results.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the sample, the study focuses on the elections of two countries: the last presidential elections of Costa Rica in 2022 and the last general elections of Spain in 2023. Specifically, the four most voted parties in the last elections have been selected in both countries (El País, 2023; Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones. Dirección ejecutiva. Unidad de estadística, 2022), and two periods: electoral and post-electoral¹.

¹ With regard to the analysis periods, in Spain the election period spans 22 days. Thus, the election phase runs from July 1 through July 22, with the election taking place on July 23; and the post-election phase runs from September 1 through September 22, 2023. For the analysis of Costa Rica, the election period consists of two phases, each lasting one month. The first, corresponding to the

Finally, the study focuses on the social network Facebook, as it is one of the social networks commonly used in political communication strategies, along with X (Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020; Ruiz Del Olmo & Bustos Díaz, 2020; Wilches et al., 2024).

3.1. Identifying Citizens' Interests: Comparative Analysis and Thematic Categorization

As previously described (Table 1), the first step was to identify and link the interests of Spaniards and Costa Ricans expressed in the CIS (2023a, 2023b) and CIEP-UCR (Unidad de Opinión Pública² et al., 2021, 2022) surveys. The process of identifying and merging topics of interest between citizens of Costa Rica and Spain was based on a systematic approach that combined comparative analysis and thematic categorization, as described below.

The thematic fusion began with the identification of conceptual equivalences between the topics of interest in both countries, following the theory of conceptual equivalence in comparative studies. This theory posits that social phenomena can manifest themselves similarly in different cultural contexts (Piovani & Baranger, 2023). Citizens' interests were identified directly from the questions included in surveys from both countries, extracting the specific topics on which they were asked (e.g., "unemployment," "healthcare," "corruption").

Subsequently, the topics of interest were grouped according to their conceptual similarity, following the principle of thematic categorization. This method allows for the identification of significant patterns and the creation of coherent categories that reflect shared concerns among different populations (Moreno Herrera, 2007; Soriano Miras et al., 2021). Table 3 shows the categorized interests.

3.2. Design of the Analysis Instrument

Once the interests were identified, these had to be integrated into the content analysis sheet designed based on others validated in previous studies (Acosta, 2019; Castro Martínez & Díaz Morilla, 2021; Gamir-Ríos, 2021; Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020; Moreno Tostado & Arriaga Ornelas, 2019; Rodríguez Fidalgo et al., 2019) (Table 2).

Table 2. *Quantitative Content Analysis on Social Media: Analysis Sheet*

Content Management on Facebook		
Message content	Political issues, referring to general ideological and political matters	Finance and investments.
		Good governance.
		Employment and economic development.
		Urban planning, large projects and natural spaces.
		Mobility, public space and environmental quality.
		Citizen security.
		Social policy.
		Education, culture, festivals and sports.
		International.
	Policy issues, linked to specific sectoral proposals or criticisms.	
	Campaign issues related to the promotion of the party, the dissemination of the agenda of events and public acts, and calls for mobilization or participation	

first round (R1) of voting, runs from January 2 to February 2, 2022, with Election Day on February 6, 2022. The period corresponding to the second round (R2) runs from February 10 to March 10, 2022, with Election Day on April 3, 2022. The post-election period also lasts one month, from April 10, 2022, to May 10, 2022.

² Public Opinion Unit

	Personal issues related to candidates' anecdotes, interesting facts, skills, attributes, or prior career paths.
	Ceremonial Issues related to courtesy or protocol messages, such as institutional greetings, congratulations (e.g., Christmas or New Year), anniversaries, tributes, condolences, and other symbolic expressions associated with special dates or commemorative events.
User Interaction	
Reactions	Number of "like", "love", "haha", "care", "wow", "sad" and "angry" emojis.
Shares	Number of times being shared.
Comments	Number of user comments.
Engagement	((Number of reactions + number of shares + number of comments)/ Number of posts)*100).

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on Acosta (2019), Castro Martínez and Díaz Morilla (2021), Gamir-Ríos (2021), Miquel-Segarra et al. (2020), Moreno Tostado and Arriaga Ornelas (2019) and Rodríguez Fidalgo et al. (2019).

As can be seen in Table 2, for the content analysis, 1 subsection with 13 categories is proposed based on the previous studies consulted and the results relating to the interests of the citizens under study once validated and categorized (Table 3).

To this end, a triple coding methodology was implemented using three expert coders trained in political content analysis. These coders received specific training on the operational definitions of the categories and conducted a pilot coding exercise to standardize criteria. Subsequently, they independently classified the 69 interests identified within the categories of the analysis sheet (Table 2), recording their results on a shared digital platform. Discrepancies were identified in 20 interests (28.9% of the total), which were resolved in consensus sessions by adopting the category with the highest assignment frequency. The calculated Fleiss Kappa coefficient yielded an average observed agreement $p_o = 0.8068$, an expected agreement by chance $p_e = 0.2074$, and an overall value of $\kappa = 0.7561$, indicative of substantial agreement. The final assignment can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. *Categorization of Citizens' Interests*

Political Issues (general ideological and political issues)	5. Mobility, public space and environmental quality	9. International
1. Finance and investments	Environment	Wars in general
Tax increase	Climate change	War between Ukraine and Russia
Tax fraud	Infrastructures	Crisis with Morocco. Ceuta and Melilla borders
Banks	6. Citizen security	Foreign policy and international relations. Spain's role in the international arena
2. Good governance	Citizen insecurity	Policy Issues (specific sectoral proposals or criticisms)
Corruption and fraud	Drugs	Agriculture, livestock and fishing
Administration of Justice	Gender violence	The depopulation of rural Spain
The bad behavior of politicians	Terrorism, ETA	Problems related to water scarcity. Drought
The lack of trust in politicians and institutions	Increase in homophobic hate, violence, and attacks	The statutes of autonomy
The lack of agreements, unity, and capacity for collaboration. Political situation and instability.	7. Social policy	Nationalisms
The workings of democracy	Pensions	The independence of Catalonia

What political parties do	Social problems	Extremism
Political problems in general	Increased social tension, social unrest	Shortages, lack of raw materials and supplies
The Government and specific parties or politicians	Racism	The rise in energy tariffs
3. Employment and economic development	Immigration	Health hazards: COVID-19. The coronavirus. Lack of sufficient resources to deal with the pandemic
Unemployment	Emigration	There is a lack of clarity in the information and measures related to COVID-19
The economic crisis, the problems of an economic nature	Women's issues	Having to be confined at home
The Labor Reform	Inequalities, including gender inequality, class differences, and poverty	The role of the media and social networks: disinformation, information manipulation, and the spread of hoaxes
Problems related to job quality	The functioning of public services	Low civic awareness (lack of civic-mindedness, lack of civic spirit)
Employment consequences of the pandemic	The lack of public services. The cuts.	Personal worries and situations
Problems related to the self-employed sector	The abortion law	Psychological problems (worries, loneliness, sadness, helplessness, etc.)
The Spanish production model. The lack of investment in industry and R&D	Healthcare	Concern about their healthcare, and that of family and friends
4. Urban planning, large projects and natural spaces	Evictions	Uncertainties about the future, insecurity, and fear of the future
Housing	8. Education, culture, festivals and sport	The monarchy
Squatting	Education	Campaign issues
Mortgages	Youth-related problems. Lack of support and opportunities for young people	Personal Issues
	The crisis of values	Ceremonial Issues

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on CIS (2023a, 2023b) and Unidad de Opinión Pública et al. (2021, 2022).

4. RESULTS

The results are presented in accordance with the stated objectives.

4.1. Thematic Alignment and Engagement

The results of the binary coding procedure of the Facebook posts are shown in Table 4 alongside the electoral results (El País, 2023; Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones. Dirección ejecutiva. Unidad de estadística, 2022) and those relating to the forms of interaction, and consequent level of engagement (O1, O2, O3 and O4).

Table 4. Election Results, Thematic Alignment, and Interaction

Party/ Candidate	% Votes		Thematic Alignment (0–1)	Likes	Comments	Shares	Engagement	No. posts
SPAIN								
ELECTIONS								
PP	33.05%		0.205	66,663	20,822	38,123	172,066	73
PSOE	31.70%		0.274	61,366	20,587	25,003	172,510	62
VOX	12.39%		0.396	211,015	50,063	34,321	324,614	91
SUMAR	12.31%		0.544	42,702	13,304	12,535	100,796	68
POST-ELECTIONS								
PP	33.05%		0.788	21,367	5,954	16,274	83,837	52
PSOE	31.70%		0.588	10,062	2,752	7,575	59,968	20
VOX	12.39%		0.725	42,361	13,370	8,762	161,233	40
SUMAR	12.31%		1	824	201	1,209	74,467	3
COSTA RICA								
ELECTIONS: Round 1								
PLN- FIGUERES	26.91%	45.97%	0.53	177,408	13,492	60,563	196,455	128
PPSD-CHAVES	16.55%	51.47%	0.42	133,997	33,246	15,044	52,532	347
NR-ALVARADO	14.67%	-	0.3	273,474	37,210	49,807	98,495	366
PLP-FEINZAIG	12.23%	-	0.54	148,069	11,923	12,575	105,869	163
ELECTIONS: Round 2								
PLN- FIGUERES	26.91%	45.97%	0.68	210,652	21,282	44,137	368,095	75
PPSD-CHAVES	16.55%	51.47%	0.32	167,631	32,931	25,370	121,469	186
SUBTOTAL ELECTIONS								
PLN- FIGUERES			0.61	388,060	34,774	104,700	259,869	203
PPSD-CHAVES			0.37	301,628	66,177	40,414	76,589	533
NR-ALVARADO			0.30	273,474	37,210	49,807	98,495	366
PLP-FEINZAIG			0.54	148,069	11,923	12,575	105,869	163
POST-ELECTIONS								
PLN- FIGUERES	26.91%	45.97%	0.94	29,730	1,105	3,810	192,472	18
PPSD-CHAVES	16.55%	51.47%	0	6,821	916	3,317	276,350	4
NR-ALVARADO	14.67%	-	0.2	125,859	5,408	11,187	206,455	69
PLP-FEINZAIG	12.23%	-	0.64	103,387	5,032	10,015	538,336	22

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The analysis of thematic alignment (O3) reveals a marked difference in the behavior of Spanish political parties between periods. There is a clear trend toward a general increase in the post-election phase for all four parties analyzed. The PP experienced the greatest percentage increase, with a rise of approximately 284% (from 0.205 to 0.788). SUMAR was the only party to reach the maximum alignment (1.00) in the post-election period, implying complete thematic coherence. It also had the highest value (0.544) during the election period. The PSOE showed the smallest percentage increase in alignment, with a rise of 114.6% (from 0.274 to 0.588), although its value in the post-election period (0.588) was higher than that of VOX (0.396) during the election period.

Unlike the generalized increase observed in Spain during the post-election period, Costa Rica shows a more heterogeneous pattern. Two parties substantially increased their alignment during the post-election period

(PLN-FIGUERES and PLP-FEINZAIG), while the other two experienced significant declines (PPSD-CHAVES and NR-ALVARADO). In contrast, the post-election period is characterized by the most extreme differences observed throughout the analysis. PLN-FIGUERES reached an alignment of 0.94, increasing by 77.4% compared to its value in the first round and by 38.2% compared to the second round, consolidating almost absolute thematic coherence. PLP-FEINZAIG increased its alignment to 0.64 (an 18.5% increase), maintaining moderate-to-high coherence. NR-ALVARADO fell to 0.20 (a 33.3% reduction), placing it at a very low level of coherence. PPSD-Chaves experiences a total collapse in its alignment to 0.00, implying a complete lack of thematic coherence in the period following its electoral victory. This last finding constitutes the most pronounced anomaly in the analysis.

Regarding the electoral period, it is important to clarify that, due to differences in electoral systems, all Costa Rican data for the entire electoral process has been grouped together to facilitate comparison with Spain, where there is a single electoral period. However, this grouping presents methodological limitations that must be considered: the parties that advanced to the second round (PLN and PPSD) had greater exposure and communicative activity than those eliminated in the first round (NR and PLP), which particularly affects the comparability of engagement metrics and the number of publications.

Regarding thematic alignment, it's worth noting that Spain exhibits a clear inverse correlation between electoral success and alignment: the major parties PP (33.05% of votes) and PSOE (31.70%) show the lowest levels of alignment (0.205 and 0.274, respectively), while the minor parties VOX (12.39%) and SUMAR (12.31%) have higher values (0.396 and 0.544). In Costa Rica, the picture is more heterogeneous. PLN-Figueres leads in thematic alignment (0.61), while PPSD-Chaves, the likely winner of the elections, shows a relatively low alignment (0.37). Notably, NR-Alvarado shows the lowest alignment (0.30), and PLP-Feinzaig shows a high alignment (0.54). In comparative terms, Costa Rican parties generally show higher levels of alignment than Spanish ones, with an average value of 0.46 compared to 0.35 in Spain.

Analysis of interaction metrics and, consequently, engagement levels in Spain and Costa Rica (O4) also reveals divergent patterns. While Spain shows a general decline in absolute engagement during the post-election period, Costa Rica exhibits heterogeneous trends. Specifically, during the Spanish election period, VOX led with 324,614 total engagements, followed by the PSOE, PP, and SUMAR. It is noteworthy that VOX, with only 12.39% of the vote, achieved an engagement rate of 88.7% higher than the PP, which obtained the highest percentage of votes. In the Spanish post-election period, all parties reduced their absolute engagement, with an average decrease of 50.7%. VOX maintained its lead (161,233), followed by the PP (83,837).

In Costa Rica, in the first round (R1), PLN-Figueres led with 196,455 engagements, followed by PLP-Feinzaig (105,869) and NR-Alvarado (98,495). PPSD-Chaves, the eventual winner, had the lowest engagement (52,532). In the second round (R2), PLN-Figueres dramatically increased its engagement to 368,095 (+87.4%), while PPSD-Chaves rose to 121,469 (+131.2%), demonstrating maximum mobilization in the decisive phase. In the post-election period, the absolute values varied significantly between candidates: PLP-Feinzaig reached 538,336 and PPSD-Chaves 276,350.

Overall, during the electoral period (R1 and R2), PLN-Figueres accumulated the highest engagement (259,869), followed by PLP-Feinzaig (105,869) and NR-Alvarado (98,495). It is striking that PPSD-Chaves, the eventual winner, showed the lowest engagement (76,589) despite having participated in both electoral rounds. It should be noted that a direct comparison of these figures between Costa Rican parties is limited by the aforementioned time differences. Therefore, to complement the analysis and allow for a more accurate comparison, the average engagement per post was calculated. In Spain, VOX obtained 3,568 interactions per *post*, while in Costa Rica the values ranged from 144 (PPSD) to 1,280 (PLN). This metric demonstrates that the Spanish strategy, although less prolific in terms of the volume of posts, was more efficient in terms of

engagement per published content. In the Costa Rican context, PLN-Figueres (1,280 interactions/ *post*) shows greater efficiency than PPSD-Chaves (144), suggesting qualitative differences in the ability to mobilize audiences beyond exposure time.

4.2. Relationship Between Thematic Alignment and Interaction

Based on the data by matches relating to thematic alignment (x) and engagement (y) the Pearson Correlation coefficient (r) is determined by country to undertake the O5 (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. *Thematic Alignment and Engagement. Spain*

Country	Spain									
Period	Election					Post-election				
Party	Spain (sample)	PP	PSOE	VOX	SUMAR	Spain (sample)	PP	PSOE	VOX	SUMAR
Media alignment / Alignment	0.35475	0.205	0.274	0.396	0.544	0.77525	0.788	0.588	0.725	1
Media engagement	192,496.5	172,066	172,510	324,614	100,796	94,876	83,837	59,968	161,233	74,467
Covariance $\approx$	-2,408.990					1,954,698				
Standard deviation of alignment $\approx$	0.1473					0.1834				
Standard deviation of engagement $\approx$	118,277.300					66,000,000				
Pearson coefficient (r) $\approx$	-0.139					+0.162				

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 6. Thematic Alignment and Engagement. Costa Rica

Country	Costa Rica															
Period	Election (R1)					Election (R2)			Election (R1 and R2)*			Post-election				
Party - candidate	Costa Rica (Sample)	PLN- F.	PPSD-CH.	NR-A.	PLP-F.	Costa Rica (Sample)	PLN- F.	PPSD-CH.	Costa Rica (Sample)	PLN- F.	PPSD-CH.	Costa Rica (Sample)	PLN- F.	PPSD-CH.	NR-A.	PLP-F.
Media alignment / Alignment	0.4475	0.53	0.42	0.3	0.54	0.50	0.68	0.32	0.4875	0.605	0.37	0.445	0.94	0	0.2	0.64
Media engagement	113,337.75	196,455	52,532	98.495	105,869	244,782.00	368,095	121,469	184,637.75	282,275	87,000.50	303,403.250	192,472	276,350	206,455	538,336
Covariance $\approx$	-663,408.0					44,409.000			1,109,117.0	18309	-3,473.40	8,929.000				
Standard deviation alignment	0.1589					0.360			0.1996	0.106	0.0707	0.2810				
Standard deviation of engagement	223,514,000.0					506,362.000			184,428,000	121,346.2	48,706.40	191,078,000				
Pearson coefficient (r)	-0.019					0.244			0.03	+1	-1	0				

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As shown in Table 5, in Spain, during the election period, the Pearson correlation obtained was negative and very weak ($p \approx -0.139$). This weak negative correlation is influenced by the data distribution, where VOX shows the highest engagement (324,614) with a medium alignment (0.396), while SUMAR, despite having the highest alignment (0.544), registers a considerably lower engagement (100,796). The overall covariance was $-2,408,990$, a numerically high but negative value, indicating an inverse trend. However, due to the high dispersion of engagement ($\sigma \approx 118,277,300$), the covariance is not sufficient to generate a strong correlation.

However, in the post-election period, the Pearson correlation, although weak, was positive ($p \approx +0.162$). In this phase, the parties concentrated on a higher thematic alignment (from 0.588 to 1.00), with SUMAR exhibiting the highest alignment (1.00), although its engagement (74,467) remained among the lowest. VOX registered the highest engagement (161,233), contributing to the positive, albeit weak, coefficient. The calculated covariance is 1,954,698. The lower dispersion of engagement ($\sigma \approx 66,000,000$) compared to the election period resulted in a slightly stronger covariance coefficient.

In the case of Costa Rica, as with the thematic alignment, the data from the first and second rounds of the electoral period were grouped to allow for an objective comparison with the post-election period and with Spain, both of which include four parties (Table 6). The grouped data show a very weak positive correlation ($p \approx +0.03$), which falls between the individual values. The calculated covariance was 1,109,117. Although this covariance is numerically large, the high standard deviation of engagement ($\sigma \approx 184,428,000$) for the entire set dilutes the covariance value, resulting in a coefficient close to zero. This weak correlation is influenced by PLN-Figueres, which recorded the highest engagement in the second round (368,095), and by PPSD-Chaves, which recorded the lowest engagement in the first round (52,532) despite having an alignment similar to the mean. Regarding the internal dynamics between the rounds, for PLN-Figueres, the increase in thematic alignment from R1 to R2 was positively related to the increase in its engagement.

In the period following the elections, the correlation remained practically zero ($p \approx +0.000$), a value indicating a complete absence of a linear relationship. Regarding the statistical parameters, the covariance was 8,929, a very low value. The standard deviation of the alignment ($\sigma \approx 0.2810$) was high, indicating the dispersion of campaign issues during this phase.

To illustrate the magnitude and direction of the association between thematic alignment (x) and engagement (y), a linear regression model is presented (Table 7). This exercise has a descriptive-illustrative purpose: the estimated coefficients quantify the observed relationship, but should not be interpreted as population estimates or as evidence of causality, given the limitations inherent in the small sample size.

Table 7. *Thematic Alignment and Engagement: Simple Linear Regression Model*

Period / Country	Pearson Coefficient (r)	Det. Coef. R^2	Intercept (β_0)	Coefficient (β_1)	Predictability (R^2 %)	Regression Equation ($y \approx \beta_0 + \beta_1 x$)
Spain: Elections	-0.102	0.0104	214,075.69	-60,518.48	1.04%	$y \approx 214,075.69 - 60,518.48 x$
Spain: Post-Elections	+0.162	0.0262	39,043.99	75,409.88	2.62%	$y \approx 39,043.99 + 75,409.88 x$
Costa Rica: Elections	+0.030	0.0009	180,208.61	11,517.21	0.09%	$y \approx 180,208.61 + 11,517.21 x$
Costa Rica: Post-Elections	+0.000	0.0000	303,351.80	113.44	0%	$y \approx 303,351.80 + 11.44 x$

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In Spain, during the election period, the thematic alignment coefficient was negative (-60,518.48). The coefficient of determination is 0.0104, meaning that only 1.04% of the variation in engagement was explained by the thematic alignment coefficient. This is explained by thematic alignment. After the elections, the alignment coefficient is positive ($\beta_1 \approx 75,409.88$). The R^2 of 0.0262 is the highest being recorded, indicating that 2.62% of the variability in engagement is explained by alignment.

In Costa Rica, the combined data from the two rounds of the electoral period yield a positive alignment coefficient ($\beta_1 \approx 11,517.21$). The resulting R^2 is 0.0009, meaning that only 0.09% of the variation in engagement is explained by the model. After the elections, the alignment coefficient is minimally positive ($\beta_1 \approx 113.44$). The R^2 is 0, indicating that the model does not explain the observed variation in engagement.

In general, the regression models consistently show low R^2 values (between 0% and 2.62%), indicating that thematic alignment explains a minimal proportion of the variation in the engagement. Two distinct patterns are observed between countries: Spain shows a reversal in the sign of the coefficient between the electoral (negative) and post-electoral (positive) periods, with the latter having greater explanatory power in the overall analysis. Costa Rica, on the other hand, maintains positive coefficients in both periods, although close to zero, especially in the post-electoral phase where the predictive capacity of the model is practically nil.

4.3. Relationship Between Thematic Alignment and Election Results

The same procedure as in the previous case (calculation of Pearson's correlation coefficient) is applied to analyze the relationship between thematic alignment (x) and electoral results (y) (Table 8).

Table 8. *Thematic Alignment and Election Results*

Country	Spain					Costa Rica				
Party Party - candidate		PP	PSOE	VOX	ADD		PLN- F.	PPSD-CH.	NR-A.	PLP-F.
Thematic Alignment		0.205	0.274	0.396	0.544		0.53	0.42	0.3	0.54
Alignment Mean	0.35475					0.4475				
Votes (%)		33.05%	31.70%	12.39%	12.31%		26.91%	16.55%	14.67%	12.23%
Mean of Election Results	0.2236					0.1759				
Covariance $\approx$	-0.00188					+0.00244				
Standard Deviation Alignment $\approx$	0.1473					0.1124				
Standard Deviation of Election Results $\approx$	0.1057					0.0646				
Pearson Coefficient (r) $\approx$	-0.1205					+0.3365				

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Note: Using data on the political alignment during the election period—and, in the case of Costa Rica, the results of the first round of voting—it was possible to compare the same number of parties per country.

In Spain, the data demonstrates a clear disconnect between thematic focus and electoral success. The two parties with the most votes, the PP (33.05%) and the PSOE (31.70%), have the lowest thematic alignments (0.205 and 0.274, respectively). At the opposite extreme, SUMAR has the highest thematic alignment (0.544) in the entire Spanish sample, but obtains the lowest electoral result (12.31%). VOX is situated in between, with a thematic alignment of 0.396 and a result of 12.39%.

In Costa Rica, the distribution of political parties shows a positive correlation ($\rho \approx +0.3365$), although not a perfect one. Specifically, PLN-Figueres exhibits high thematic alignment (0.53) and obtains the best electoral result (26.91%). This party acts as the main driver of the positive correlation. PPSD-Chaves presents intermediate alignment (0.42) and an intermediate result (16.55%). At the extreme that weakens the linearity, PLP-Feinzaig has high alignment (0.54) but a low result (12.23%). And NR-Alvarado has the lowest alignment (0.30) in the sample and a low result (14.67%), which is slightly better than that of PLP.

Finally, as in the case of the relationship of thematic alignment with engagement, a simple linear regression model is developed regarding its relationship with electoral results (Table 9).

Table 9. *Thematic Alignment and Election Results: A Simple Linear Regression Model*

Period / Country	Pearson Coefficient (r)	Det. Coef. R^2	Intercept (β_0)	Alignment Coefficient (β_1)	Predictability ($R^2\%$)	Regression Equation ($y \approx \beta_0 + \beta_1 x$)
Spain: Elections	-0.1205	0.0145	0.2543	-0.0866	1.45%	$y \approx 0.2543 - 0.0866x$
Costa Rica: Round 1	+0.3365	0.1132	0.0893	0.1937	11.32%	$y \approx 0.0893 + 0.1937x$

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The simple linear regression model (Table 9) establishes that thematic alignment is not a significant linear predictor of the election result in any of the cases analyzed, although the impact of this variable differs markedly between countries. In Spain, the coefficient of determination is only 0.0145, which implies that thematic alignment barely explains 1.45% of the variability in the vote. This disconnect is formalized with a negative alignment coefficient (-0.0866), meaning that an increase in thematic concentration predicts a slight decrease in the percentage of votes. Meanwhile, in Costa Rica (R1), the predictability is significantly higher, with an R^2 of 0.1132, indicating that thematic alignment explains 11.32% of the variation in the vote. Although this figure is much higher than that of Spain, the model still leaves almost 89% of the variability unexplained. However, the alignment coefficient is positive ($+0.1937$), suggesting that, in the Costa Rican context, greater thematic concentration predicts an increase in the percentage of votes. Therefore, two contrasting patterns are observed between countries: Spain shows a negative alignment coefficient, while Costa Rica presents a positive one. The Costa Rican case registers an explanatory power approximately eight times greater than that of Spain, although in both contexts most of the variability in the electoral outcome remains unexplained by the model (98.55% in Spain and 88.68% in Costa Rica).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in this research pose a substantial challenge to the prevailing assumptions in contemporary digital political communication (Carchi- Maurat et al., 2025; Mukherjee, 2020; von Nostitz et al., 2024). Specifically, based on the hypothesis and objectives set forth regarding the impact of thematic alignment, the low levels of alignment during the electoral period in both countries indicate that parties do not systematically prioritize the issues identified by citizens as relevant. This finding contrasts with the literature that assumes contemporary political parties are market-oriented (Lees-Marshment, 2025), suggesting that the effectiveness of communication strategies depends on multiple factors and not solely on personalized attention to citizens' interests (Kumar et al., 2025).

The increase in thematic alignment during the post-election period in Spain confirms the findings of Blasco-Duatis et al. (2018) regarding intermediate agenda-setting, in which they note that thematic construction is driven more by the dynamics of interaction between the media and political parties than by the direct reflection of public concerns as measured in surveys.

The Costa Rican case, particularly the collapse of PPSD-Chaves's support to 0.00 after winning with 51.47%, is an exceptional finding that also challenges dominant theoretical frameworks. This result is not due to a lack of activity on the platform, but rather to the nature of the disseminated content, all of which was classified as Campaign Issues and did not align with the categories of citizen interests identified in this study. This could be interpreted as a shift toward messages of an institutional nature or focused on consolidating leadership after the electoral victory. This pattern modifies the prescription of coherent post-victory communication and suggests that, in certain institutional and cultural contexts, less thematically aligned post-election

communication can be functional for managing broad coalitions without specific programmatic commitments.

Specifically, regarding the relationship between thematic alignment and engagement, the hypothesis is categorically rejected in all the contexts analyzed. The extremely weak correlations and insignificant coefficients of determination (maximum R^2 of 2.62%) confirm that thematic alignment does not explain the variability in engagement. This finding directly contradicts the central premise of audience-centric political communication (Chua & Westlund, 2019; Kim, 2024), which posits that addressing citizens' expectations generates greater interaction. The results suggest that digital political engagement responds to factors other than thematic relevance, at least independently (Fernández Gómez et al., 2026).

Regarding the impact of thematic alignment on election results, the hypothesis must also be rejected for Spain, although it is partially confirmed for Costa Rica, revealing a fundamental contextual contingency. In Spain, the negative correlation indicates that thematic alignment not only fails to predict electoral success but also exhibits a slight inverse trend. This pattern contradicts the prescriptions of market-oriented political marketing (Barrientos-Báez, 2022; Lees-Marshment, 2025), suggesting that catch-all strategies with thematically broad messages were more effective than specialization aligned with specific concerns.

In Costa Rica, the moderate positive correlation indicates a stronger association between thematic alignment and electoral success, although the model fails to explain 88.68% of the variability. This difference could be due to institutional and party system factors: less party institutionalization and greater electoral volatility in Costa Rica versus a more consolidated party system in Spain, where electoral decisions are more anchored in political identities that transcend current thematic agendas (Enders et al., 2022).

Despite the relevance and significance of the results, these findings should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations in the design. Particularly relevant is the small number of units of analysis (4 parties per country), which limits the statistical power and inferential scope of the study, reinforcing its exploratory-descriptive nature. Therefore, the regression models presented (Tables 7 and 9) should be interpreted as a descriptive-illustrative tool, without any intention of generalization or establishing causal relationships.

Additionally, operationalizing thematic alignment through surveys may not fully capture real citizen concerns, and Facebook alone does not necessarily represent the entire digital ecosystem. Finally, engagement as an indicator also has limitations, as it can be influenced by unconsidered variables such as advertising investment, the previous size of the audience, or the charisma of the candidates.

Despite these limitations, the research provides relevant empirical evidence on the complex relationship between thematic alignment, engagement, and electoral success in comparative contexts. Taken together, the findings allow for a refinement of several assumptions in dominant theories of digital political communication. More specifically, they question the universal applicability of the market-oriented approach to political marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2025), demonstrating that a mechanical adaptation to citizens' demands does not always lead to higher levels of engagement or electoral performance in multiparty contexts. Likewise, the results challenge audience-centric perspectives by demonstrating that political engagement also appears to depend on emotional and identity-based dynamics that go beyond mere issue alignment (Chua & Westlund, 2019; Kim, 2024).

In summary, this research demonstrates that the relationships between issue alignment, digital engagement, and electoral success are more complex and contextually contingent than dominant theories assume. Future research should expand the analysis to more contexts and platforms, explore qualitative dimensions, and examine the mediating effects of variables to build more robust theories of contemporary digital political communication.

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