

COMPARING THE DEMOCRATIC VALUE OF FACEBOOK DISCUSSIONS ACROSS THE PROFILES OF SPANISH POLITICAL CANDIDATES DURING THE 2011 GENERAL ELECTION

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COMPARACIÓN DEL VALOR DEMOCRÁTICO DE LAS DISCUSIONES DE FACEBOOK ENTRE PERFILES DE CANDIDATOS POLÍTICOS ESPAÑOLES A LAS ELECCIONES GENERALES DE 2011

Cómo citar este artículo / Citation: Valera Ordaz, L. 2017. "Comparing the democratic value of Facebook discussions across the profiles of Spanish political candidates during the 2011 General Election". *Revista Internacional de Sociología* 75 (1): e052. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/ris.2017.75.1.15.119>

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Received: 03/08/2015. **Accepted:** 20/03/2016.

Published on line: 02/03/2017

ABSTRACT

This article examines the democratic value of user-generated comments on the Facebook profiles of three Spanish candidates during the Spanish General Election campaign of 2011 through a content analysis that operationalizes deliberative democracy. The findings show that these online spaces do not meet deliberative standards, but that they still serve democratic functions, such as citizen self-expression, democratic socialization and reinforcement of social cohesion among party activists and sympathizers. Moreover, results indicate that democratic value might vary depending on the size of the party where talk takes place. Political conversation on the walls of hegemonic candidates who belong to big consolidated political parties is mostly oriented towards self-expression and features some ideological diversity, so that individuals are sporadically confronted with diversity. For its part, talk on the Facebook profile of the minor candidate lacks fundamental disagreement but includes more in-group interaction, allowing minority ideological spheres for the cultivation of social cohesion and the construction of collective narratives in favorable discursive conditions.

KEYWORDS

Deliberation; Democracy; Online discussion; Political communication; Social networks.

RESUMEN

El artículo examina el valor democrático de los comentarios ciudadanos en los perfiles de Facebook de tres candidatos políticos españoles durante la campaña de las Elecciones Generales 2011 a través de una operacionalización de la democracia deliberativa. Los resultados reflejan que las conversaciones no cumplen los criterios deliberativos, pero que aun así revisten beneficios democráticos, como la autoexpresión ciudadana, la socialización democrática y el refuerzo de la cohesión social entre activistas y simpatizantes. Además, reflejan que el valor democrático varía ligeramente en función del tamaño del partido donde se produce. La conversación en los muros de candidatos que pertenecen a partidos mayoritarios está orientada hacia la autoexpresión, pero también confronta a los hablantes esporádicamente con la diversidad. Por su parte, la discusión en el muro de la candidata de un partido minoritario es ideológicamente homogénea, pero incluye más interacción discursiva, permitiendo desarrollar argumentario y cultivar la cohesión social en condiciones discursivas favorables.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Comunicación política; Deliberación; Democracia; Discusión online; Redes sociales.

INTRODUCTION

Internet and politics: a theoretical schism

The emergence and expansion of digital technologies has attracted significant academic interest in terms of their impact on the public sphere and, more generally, on politics and democracy itself. Researchers have been divided from the early nineties into those who emphasized the potential of the Internet to improve democracy and revolutionize politics (Rheingold 2002; Lévy 2002; Jenkins 2006) and those who held rather prudent and skeptical stances: either predicting that digital technologies would just be normalized by the particular socio-political contexts in which they were deployed (Davis 2005; 2001; Margolis and Resnick 2000) or warning against the different threats to democracy that the Internet entailed (Sunstein 2001; Precht 2010).

The notion that the Internet might have a revolutionary effect on politics, and particularly that it might facilitate the creation of a deliberative virtual public sphere, has sparked an intense and at times acrimonious theoretical debate *between* the so-called 'revolutionaries' or cyber-optimists school and the so-called 'normalization' or cyber-realist school. (Wright 2011:245)

On the one hand, cyber-optimists contended that the Internet would contribute to improving democracy by offering new channels of direct communication with political elites, increasing public transparency and allowing citizens to self-organize and participate in both conventional and non-conventional politics (Rheingold 2002; Lévy 2002; Jenkins 2006). Some authors even claimed the rebirth of direct democracy thanks to digital technologies, which would strengthen social capital, increase self-government practices and provide the material infrastructure for direct decision making (Lévy 2002).

This view of communication technologies as a driving force of political and social progress is nothing new. Technological optimism has emerged periodically after every innovation since the industrial revolution (Davis 2001; Vedel 2003). In that sense, cyber-optimists have been harshly criticized for their utopianism and their tendency to reduce the problems associated with democracy to their procedural aspects. For example, Morozov (2013; 2011) argued that cyber-optimists' approaches either exhibit deep ignorance about the problems associated with political theory and democracy functioning; or they deliberately refuse to confront them with the required seriousness and rigor. In an article in *News Republic*, he wonders:

What if some limits to democratic participation in the pre-Wikipedia era were not just a consequence of high communication costs but stemmed from a deliberate effort to root out populism, prevent cooptation, or protect expert decision making? In other words, if some public institutions eschewed wider participation for reasons that have nothing to do with the ease of connectivity, isn't the Internet a solution to a problem that doesn't exist?¹

For their part, cyber-pessimists have shown skepticism about ICT's capacity to consolidate democracy in a number of ways. Some highlighted the resistance to democratization of political elites and most citizens' lack of interest in politics (Davis 2001). Some conceptualized the impact of the Internet as that of a simply symbolic revolution (Mazzoneli 2001), limited to esthetic aspects of political communication but unable to engender a transformation of political practices. Others argued that the revolutionary potential of the Internet would be normalized by the socio-political reality leading to *politics as usual* (Margolis and Resnick 2000).

A few scholars even warned against different dangers associated with ICT's, such as communicative endogamy, the reduction of social empathy or the drastic suppression of exposure to diversity (Sunstein 2001; Prior 2007; Precht 2010). One of the classic critiques of digital communication's impact on democracy harkens back to the work of Cass R. Sunstein (2007; 2001), who predicted the social isolation, ideological polarization and balkanization of the public sphere as a result of the renewed power of informative selection that users are provided with online. Sharing this rationale, Precht (2010) conceived the Internet as a perfect machine to intensify prejudices (p. 480), thus facilitating the natural human tendency to reinforce preexisting views of the world and to preserve cognitive internal consistency (Festinger, 1957).

Researching online political discussions through deliberative notions: scope and limitations

In sum, this theoretical schism has largely dominated scholarship on the Internet's impact on politics during the last two decades, to such an extent that, according to Wright (2011), it has deeply harmed the empirical analysis of political conversation online in a number of ways. First, it has disproportionately influenced the specific aspects of the political use of the Internet that are actually analyzed. Studies generally address existing political actors' and institutions' Internet practices, while the interactions among ordinary citizens are rather ignored by academia (Jenkins and Thornburn 2003; Graham 2010; Wright 2011).

Second, it has predominantly led researchers to formulate narrow definitions of political discussion grounded in very strong normative standards, mostly in deliberative theory (Freelon 2010) that are easily refutable in empirical terms, since informal and non-regulated deliberative environments always tend to be fragmented and disperse (Martí 2006). In that sense, even skeptical scholars analyze online political conversations through operationalizing Habermasian notions of idealized deliberation (see, for example, Valera 2014a; 2012), which implies assuming part of the cyber-optimist's revolutionary rhetoric of which they are so critical (Wright 2011).

Third, this schism has also driven scholars to interpret empirical results in a very negative way, as long as data do not meet the high normative standards (Wright 2011). In fact, researchers operationalizing ideal notions of deliberation constantly face the uncomfortable task of trying to answer whether the analyzed conversations are deliberative or not (Black et al. 2011), since there are no absolute threshold levels from which scholars can draw any decisive conclusions. They are therefore faced with questions like: a) how to establish concrete threshold levels that variables need to exceed in order to conceive discussions as deliberative; b) how to justify these threshold levels; and c) how to infer any theoretical knowledge about the democratic value of online political talk.

These limitations derived from operationalizing normative notions of deliberation and interpreting ensuing results have often led most researchers to basically confirm that online political discussions do not reflect either all or some of the deliberative norms (see, for example, Wilhelm 1998; Dumoulin 2002; Dalhgren 2005; 2000; Jensen 2003; Ruiz et al. 2010; Valera 2014a; 2012). This empirical rejection of the revolutionary scenario predicted by the cyber-optimist school (though valuable *per se*) does not really expand our understanding of how these online political discussions are taking place and which democratic functions they are serving (if any).

Moreover, in researching online political conversations through normative deliberative notions, we might be overlooking the actual democratic value of these spontaneous interactions among citizens (Coleman and Blumler 2009; Freelon 2010; Wright 2011). Indeed, the fact that some of the variables used to measure deliberation (such as discursive diversity, argumentation or reciprocity) score poorly does not necessarily mean that these spaces are not serving any democratic purposes. It just means that they do not meet the deliberative standards associated with Habermasian notions.

“The predominance of deliberation as an analytical framework has thus led to the relative neglect of online discussion characteristics not classified under its domain” (Freelon 2010:3). To the best of our knowledge, only a few scholars have moved beyond these formal notions of deliberation when analyzing online political talk to address understudied aspects like humor or emotions in online political dialogue (Graham 2010; Sampietro and Valera, 2015). In that regard, Freelon (2010) contended that deliberation is not the only democratically valuable type of online political discussions, and suggests taking into account other analytical frameworks of democratic communication grounded in the liberal individualist and the communitarian traditions.

So far, scholarship in online political discussions has generated some shared knowledge about the

factors that influence the deliberative quality of conversations. Researchers agree that the quality of online political conversations partially depends on the design of the discussion space where they take place (Beierle 2004; Noveck 2004; Wright 2005; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011; Black et al. 2011). For example, in their study about European Union and UK online forums, Wright and Street (2007) argued that web and interface design constitute relevant factors influencing the possibility of deliberation. These findings are, in fact, consistent with offline deliberation studies, which have systematically noted that deliberation is highly context-dependent, with the rules governing the interactions deeply affecting its results (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs 2004; Ganuza 2012).

Researchers have also identified the absence or presence of a moderator as a key factor influencing deliberation (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011; Black et al. 2011; Camaj and Santana 2015). Apparently, when moderators help guide the conversation and ensure that deliberative norms such as mutual respect and rational orientation are enforced, discussions tend to be more deliberative (Albrecht 2006; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011; Black et al. 2011). Even a slight moderation seems to positively influence the deliberative quality of online conversations. For example, Camaj and Santana (2015) compared discussions hosted by the Facebook profiles of US presidential candidates in 2008 and 2012 and found that conversations in moderated sites expressed higher levels of argumentation, even though the moderation of the candidates mostly consisted in agenda-setting and content selection.

Data from 2008 and 2012 (before and after the Facebook Timeline interface) shows that discussion among commentators was more diverse and more evidence-based during the 2012 electoral campaign when candidates were provided with technological tools to moderate the political discussion on their walls more efficiently. (Camaj & Santana 2015:25)

In addition, some researchers have claimed the need to research online political discussions taking place in Internet sites that are not explicitly political (Graham 2010; Wright 2011; Black et al. 2011), since most of the scholarship on political deliberation has rather focused on online spaces that are political in nature (such as party websites, government sites, etc.). This is what Wright calls third spaces, that is, online discussion forums “with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations” (Wright 2011:254).

Analyzing discussions in third spaces would allow scholars to move towards a more inclusive picture about how the Internet is really affecting political communication and how citizens are actually using it for political dialogue. Some studies have already shown empirically that everyday political talk in online forums whose primary function is not political does

have a real democratic value (Coleman and Blumler 2009; Van Zoonen 2007; Graham 2010; 2009).

Camaj and Santana claim that Facebook can be conceived as a third space (2015), since its primary focus is not political. Indeed, Facebook has a primarily non-political orientation, but it also includes spaces where political talk emerges, such as those belonging to political parties, candidates or citizen groups. All of these offer a good starting point for analyzing political talk among ordinary citizens.

Online political discussions on Facebook

A number of studies have analyzed political conversation on social networks, since they constitute “the sociotechnical environments that most closely enable public sphere discourse for those who choose to enter the online ‘salons’ of political candidates” (Robertson, Vatrpub and Medina 2010:29). Indeed, social networks like Facebook allow for direct and open dialogue with established political actors and among citizens themselves. They also allow for activists and supporters to gather around their preferred candidates and parties; and to discuss specific public issues, which is especially relevant for political organizations that lack more traditional offline resources.

The results so far show that conversations on Facebook can be very superficial and are concentrated among a small number of users (Camaj et al. 2009). They very often consist of expressions of non-justified political preferences, and users generally lack any desire to listen, be receptive or enter into dialogue (Valera 2012). Rational argumentation is therefore scarce, since most of the commentators avoid justifying their points of view through reasoned arguments (Sweetser and Lariscy 2008).

Moreover, data reveal that these sites tend to be dominated by like-minded people, generally party activists and candidates’ supporters that share the ideological stances of the political actors hosting the discussions (Fernandes et al. 2010; Valera 2012). For example, Fernandes et al. (2010) concluded that Facebook was a means for supporters to organize and exhibit their support for their candidate, as well as a place for expressing frustration towards the opponents. Similar results were obtained by Valera (2012), who found a significant homogenous ideological scenario among commentators in the profiles of three Spanish political candidates during a non-electoral period. Indeed, her research revealed that the dissent found in the discussions hosted by the conservative candidate mostly responded to a radical sector of his own party.

But the evidence provided so far about the deliberative quality of Facebook discussions is conflictive. Studies show that discursive freedom is predominantly high, since commentators exhibit civil behavior when entering political dialogue (Camaj et

al. 2009; Valera 2012; Camaj and Santana 2015). In fact, comments are generally positive in tone, polite and respectful (Sweetser and Lariscy 2008; Woolley, Limperos and Oliver 2010).

Given the inexistence of absolute criteria for attributing deliberative quality to conversations through such operationalizations, researchers are forced to formulate rather subjective interpretations of their empirical data. In that regard, some scholars conclude that these spaces are hosting political deliberation or that they, at least, can potentially do so (Camaj et al. 2009; Fernandes et al. 2010; Camaj et al. 2013), while others reject that these conversations meet the deliberative norms (Valera 2012).

Despite these limitations, we still think that deliberative theory offers a pertinent analytical framework for empirically analyzing online political conversations, since it allows researchers to address very relevant concerns about the Internet’s impact on democracy, such as exposure to diversity, discursive freedom, argumentation and reciprocity. Even if we already know that political dialogue on the Internet does not resemble the Habermasian salons where critical public opinion emerged, it is still a useful tool for evaluating phenomena like homophily, endogamy or flaming. And its potential to assess democratic value to online political talk is expanded if we use it in the context of comparative studies.

Moreover, many of the variables employed to operationalize deliberation (such as ideological diversity or discursive freedom) are also useful to provisionally identify alternative democratic functions of these conversations beyond deliberative theory. For example, ideologically homogeneous conversations where the majority of users share political stances (that is, low rates of discursive diversity) won’t allow for deliberation as conceived by deliberative theorists, but they might serve some minority political groups to develop their shared narratives in favorable discursive conditions (intra-ideological discussions). In other words, using deliberative theory as an analytical framework will give us useful insights into which democratic functions can be attributed to online political discussions on Facebook even beyond deliberation.

As a result, we propose a comparative study whose main goal is to assess the democratic value of political discussions hosted on the profiles of three Spanish political candidates running for the General Election of November 20th 2011. We will operationalize the different conditions of deliberative democracy to conduct our analysis, but we will keep in mind that even if only some of these conditions are met, conversations might still contribute to reinforcing democracy in other ways beyond deliberative standards.

In addition, we propose a comparative approach among conversations hosted on the Facebook walls of three different Spanish political candidates, since

recent studies have suggested that online deliberation on Facebook depends on the context in which it occurs and have shown that political ideology does not affect the quality of deliberation (Camaj and Santana, 2015). Concretely, we hypothesize that conversation dynamics might vary depending on the size of the political parties represented by the candidates and their uneven centrality in the Spanish political system. That is, we think that the size of the party is an important contextual factor that might affect the Facebook conversation dynamics among followers, as well as their democratic value.

This approach stems from the fact that large hegemonic parties, such as the People's Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in the Spanish case, tend to receive a great deal of media attention and visibility during the election, as a result of their institutional presence and their centrality in the political system, so that their candidates are more likely to be known by the citizenry. This might facilitate that not only sympathizers and activists but also undecided voters are attracted to these candidates' Facebook profiles. For their part, minor parties, such as the Union, Progress and Democracy Party (UPyD)² or the United Left (IU), get much less media coverage and their candidates are not as well known by the citizens. This limited institutional and media presence might prevent non-sympathizers to visit the Facebook profiles of these candidates, so that it is reasonable to expect their online spaces to be more dominated by supporters and activists, since they lack more traditional resources to connect with each other.

Research questions

RQ1: Are these conversations valuable in deliberative terms?

RQ2: If not deliberative, which democratic functions are serving online political discussions on Facebook?

RQ3: Does the democratic value of the conversations vary depending on the party's size (hegemonic versus minor parties)?

METHODS

To analyze the democratic value of the online political conversation, we propose a content analysis that operationalizes the normative conditions of deliberative democracy, following previous research (Graham 2010; 2009; Camaj et al. 2009; Wright and Street 2007; Ruiz et al. 2010; Valera 2012). We choose to evaluate discussions through a micro-analytic approach, which "involves assessing the deliberative quality of discussion discourse through closely analyzing the content of people's comments during the deliberation" (Black et al. 2011:327).

In doing so, we keep in mind that meaning is not fixed, but it rather emerges from the context in which

conversation occurs (Krippendorf 2004). We carefully read all the posts published by the candidates on their walls (as well as any links that they might include) to identify the content that inspires the following comments. Moreover, we take into account the context, including the electoral expectations of the parties, and, more particularly, the party's size, since all of these factors shape the context in which the conversations arise.

The methodological design includes the following variables: 1) discursive diversity; 2) coherence; 3) argumentation, 4) reciprocity; and 5) discursive freedom. The relevance of diversity stems from the fact that dialogue in democracy can only arise in a context of reasonable pluralism, that is to say, taking into consideration "the fact that there exist different and incompatible philosophies of life towards which reasonable people are attracted" (Cohen 2001:237). Discursive diversity has been operationalized as the ideological agreement expressed by the commentator with the post published by the political candidate, giving rise to the following categories: a) favorable comments; b) contrary comments, c) neutral comments (they address the content of the post but cannot be attributed as favorable or contrary); and d) indifferent comments (they do not address the content of the post). This last category overlaps with incoherence, but both are registered separately for analytical clarity.

Second, coherence is relevant because conversations need to be structured so that the speakers can focus on the issues introduced by the candidates. Coherence within the conversation is measured as the thematic adaptation of the comments to the topic of the post, following previous work (Ruiz et al. 2010). We assess coherence in a flexible way, that is, when a comment deals with some or all of the issues introduced by candidates.

Third, argumentation constitutes the essence of deliberative democracy, since the normative superiority of deliberative conversations is based on the power of the best argument guaranteeing the triumph of certain opinions over less reasoned ones (Martí 2006; Graham 2009; Ganuza 2012). We operationalize argumentation through the following categories (Camaj et al. 2009; Camaj and Santana, 2015; Wilhelm 1998): a) mere comments (those which just satisfy an individual desire of self-expression but display no intention to make an argument); b) argumentative comments (those which present implicit or explicit reasoning); and c) argumentative comments with evidence (whose reasoning is complemented by evidence). It is worth noting that we conceive reasoned comments as those that include any effort to justify affirmations, even if they present fallacies or causal simplifications. Our goal is to identify if the speaker has the intention of providing reasons for his or her point of view. To do so, we take into consideration the presence of causal connectors, such as "be-

cause”, “since”, “given that”, etc. We also include the comments which, despite not containing any explicit causal expressions, can be converted into causal sentences without losing their original meaning.

Reasoned debate is closely linked to the fourth variable: reciprocity. Reciprocity refers to communicative interaction among speakers, and allows for the mutual discovery and exploration of arguments. For some authors, it is reciprocity which confers normative and epistemic superiority to a collective dialogue in comparison with the individual gathering of information (Johnson 2001).

Reciprocity has been operationalized through three different indicators: a) the number of answers published by the profiles’ authors; b) the number of answers by participants addressed to other participants; and c) the incorporation of others’ arguments into one’s own reasoning. The first indicator refers to reciprocity among the political candidate and ordinary citizens, while the other two stand for reciprocity among the participants themselves. It is worth noting that the second indicator only stands for the user’s desire to speak to another participant, which does not imply that the user actually makes any direct reference to the content of the previous comment. In that sense, it is conceived as an indicator of soft reciprocity. The third indicator, however, stands for stronger reciprocity, since it accounts for the incorporation of other users’ arguments, whether it is to adhere to or refute them. It reflects more intensely a willingness to engage in rational discussion.

Finally, discursive freedom guarantees that the debate is open to all potential participants and that speakers can express themselves without fear or hostility from the other commentators (Graham 2009). It has been operationalized as the type of language used by the commentators through the following categories: a) neutral language; b) harsh language (insults and belittlement); c) harsh language directed at specific individuals; and d) threatening language.

Sample and time frame

The sample of conversations has been selected from four specific days of the campaign: the 8th, 14th, 18th and 21st of November 2011. We needed a sample for the sake of viability, since the profiles of political candidates attract thousands of comments, especially in campaign periods. Thus, we selected all

the conversations derived from the posts published during these four days by the candidates Mariano Rajoy (PP), Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba (PSOE) and Rosa Díez (UPyD).

Initially, the sample consisted of four profiles: the three mentioned above and that of the leader of the IU, Cayo Lara. The four profiles were chosen because they belong to four national parties running in the majority of electoral districts and they constitute a representative sample of the ideological spectrum of the Spanish party system. Moreover, this sample includes two types of political parties according to their size: two large hegemonic political forces who are central in the Spanish political system (PP and PSOE), and two minor parties (UPyD and IU). However, there were no posts published by Cayo Lara for citizens to discuss during the campaign (except for some pictures).

Therefore, our sample focused on all the posts published by the three abovementioned candidates and included a total of 158 posts. However, some of the post had an informative purpose (like publishing detailed information about a campaign event) and did not allow for any debate among citizens. To distinguish between posts that could be debated among users and those that could not, we applied a previous variable called “political density” (Valera 2014b; Sampietro and Valera 2015) to the content of each selected post. This variable allowed us to elucidate if the post contained an ideological or programmatic stance that could be rationally discussed by the citizens.

Only 92 of the 158 initial posts had political density, so that the final sample consisted of 92 posts and 1332 comments, which were unevenly distributed among the candidates’ profiles (Table 1). The total sample of 1332 comments is divided into three subsamples corresponding to Mariano Rajoy (210 comments), Rubalcaba (736 comments) and Rosa Díez (386 comments).

Finally, we limited the number of comments analyzed from each conversation to a minimum of ten and a maximum of fifteen. Given the asynchronous nature of Facebook communication (which allows for potentially infinite conversations), all researchers face the decision of how to limit the sample of comments. We chose to sacrifice the number of comments in every conversation to the maximum of fifteen in order to gather the maximum number of dialogues.

Table 1.
Sample composition

Profile name	Number of posts	Number of comments
Mariano Rajoy (PP)	14	210
Con Rubalcaba (PSOE)	51	736
Rosa Díez (UPyD)	27	386
Total	92	1332

The unit of analysis was the individual message posted by users. Still, these messages were analyzed in the context of a thread. These threads constituted the unit of register in our data base.

In terms of reliability, all the conversations were coded by one researcher. However, the same methodological design is currently being applied to Facebook online political discussions by a four-member team working for a national research project³, and all the variables have been tested. Results show that the percentage of agreement between codifiers is above 90% for discursive freedom and reciprocity and above 80% for the rest of the variables.

RESULTS

In this section, we present the results concerning the deliberative quality of the conversations hosted on the profiles of the three above candidates. The results are categorized according to the different outlined variables, which operationalize deliberative norms. Moreover, these are disaggregated by candidate to compare differences among conversations.

Before presenting the deliberation results, we provide some basic quantitative information about the three candidates' use of Facebook during the 2011 campaign, including details about the number of posts, followers and the type of content that was published on their walls. This information helps contextualize the findings around the democratic value of the citizen conversations that took place on their profiles.

Candidates' Facebook use during the electoral campaign

When analyzing how often political leaders used Facebook during the campaign, our four-day sample indicates that the socialist candidate showed the largest record of publications, clearly above Rajoy and Díez, who presented more limited publication rates (Table 2). This was probably the result of the socialist's effort to intensively mobilize the citizenry, which seemed to be the only reasonable way to moderate their expected electoral defeat. Indeed, all the polls predicted an outstanding conservative victory and a socialist defeat during the November 2011 campaign, as well as a significant growth of UPyD. In this unfavorable scenario, the socialist strategy focused on

mobilization in order to prevent, or at least moderate, its announced vote loss.

Moreover, Rubalcaba was the only candidate who synchronized his Facebook profile with his Twitter account, which allowed him to launch his messages simultaneously through both social networks during the campaign and be more active online. This synchronization helps explain his intense activity on Facebook. As a result, not every post published by Rubalcaba in his Facebook profile was necessarily conceived of to foster political debate among his followers on this social network. Many posts were designed for Twitter, thus providing users with immediate detailed information about specific campaign events. In this sense, his communicative strategy was more oriented towards informative and propagandistic purposes, allowing his followers to have an updated and constant information flow about the socialist campaign, since half of the posts on Facebook did not show any political density. That is, they did not contain any ideological or programmatic stance that could be rationally discussed by the citizens.

As regards Rajoy and Díez, these candidates presented more limited publication rates (about a fifth and a third of the posts published by the socialist candidate). However, these posts were more frequently oriented towards debate, and allowed for deliberation among their respective followers. Moreover, none of these candidates synchronized their profiles with Twitter. Their messages were therefore specifically conceived of for Facebook.

Hence, Rubalcaba was the most active candidate on Facebook during the campaign thanks to the synchronization with his Twitter account, but only half of his posts allowed for political debate among users; whereas Díez and Rajoy were significantly less active but their posts fostered public discussion more frequently.

It is also worth comparing the number of followers of the three candidates at the beginning of the campaign and after the General Election (Table 3). Unfortunately, we do not have the data at the exact campaign opening (November 4th). Instead, we present those corresponding to November 8th, the fourth day of the campaign. These data show that Rubalcaba's communicative strategy was clearly successful in terms of attracting new followers, inasmuch as his intense Facebook activity during the campaign helped him to almost triple his followers. Also remarkable is

Table 2.
Type of posts by candidate

	Total posts	Posts with political density	Posts without political density
Mariano Rajoy	20	14 (70%)	6 (30%)
Con Rubalcaba	102	51 (50%)	51 (50%)
Rosa Díez	36	27 (75%)	9 (25%)
Total	158	92	66

Table 3.
Number of followers by candidate at the beginning and after the campaign

	Number of followers by November 8th 2011	Number of followers by November 21st 2011	Absolute Growth	Relative Growth
Mariano Rajoy	63,097	70,708	7,611	12.06%
Con Rubalcaba	16,430	47,999	31,569	192%
Rosa Díez	17,633	24,804	7,171	40.67%

the case of Rosa Díez, who was able to gain the support of more than 7000 new users despite being a candidate of a minor party who had much less media visibility. Rajoy, on the other hand, presented the most stable balance of followers before and after the campaign, showing a moderate increase rate of 12%.

Discursive diversity

The results show that discussions tend to be dominated by like-minded people, since the majority of the comments are favorable to the opinion expressed by the political actors (Figure 1). These findings are consistent with previous studies both in electoral periods (Camaj et al. 2009; Camaj and Santana 2015; Fernandes et al. 2010) and in non-campaign time frames (Valera 2012). This suggests that the profiles of political candidates mostly attract party activists and candidate supporters, thus allowing for direct contact with political actors and expressions of support.

However, there are some differences to be noted. In the case of Mariano Rajoy (PP) and Rubalcaba (PSOE), the two main political parties in Spain, we find some space for dissent in the form of comments expressing opposing views, whereas in the profile of Rosa Díez (a smaller party) there is practically no disagreement to be found among commentators. Her profile also presents the highest level of favorable comments, significantly above the other candidates.

In that sense, the conversations taking place in her profile seem to be much more exposed to homophily than the dialogues hosted in Rajoy's and Rubalcaba's profiles, which are slightly more open to ideological diversity. This is probably the result of the fact that both candidates belong to the two largest Spanish political parties, and therefore attract not only activists and sympathizers to their Facebook profiles, but also some undecided voters or disenchanting citizens, who express opposing views to those held by the parties.

Coherence

In terms of coherence, the findings point out that the majority of comments address the issues introduced by the candidates in their daily posts (Figure 2). These results indicate that most of the participants engage in coherent discussions about ideological and programmatic matters. That is, social networks host online dialogues that are thematically centered on public issues, as proposed by political actors. Moreover, this is the case for all the three candidates analyzed.

However, some users who post comments on the walls of political candidates (especially in the case of Rubalcaba) do so without dealing with the content introduced by the candidates. In those cases, participants either use candidates' walls to pose specific questions to them (about policy domains, concrete issues affecting users' directly) or they use them as advertising

Figure 1.
Discursive diversity by candidate

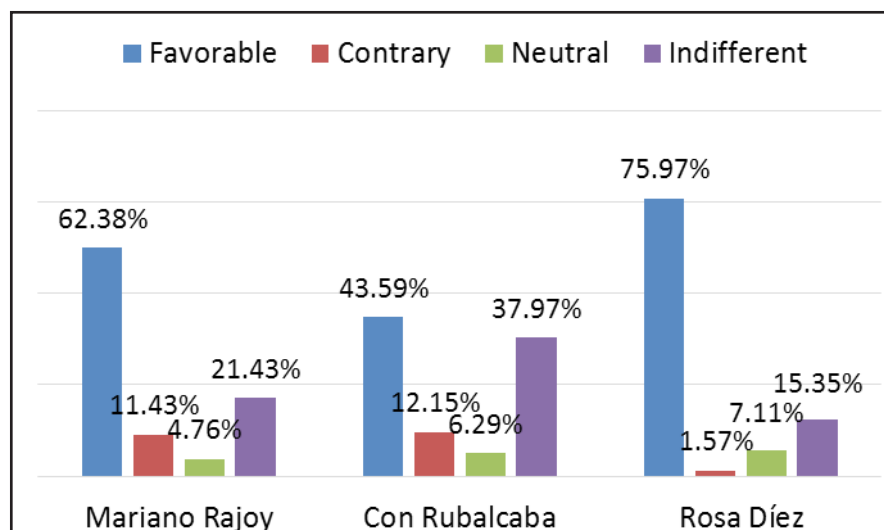
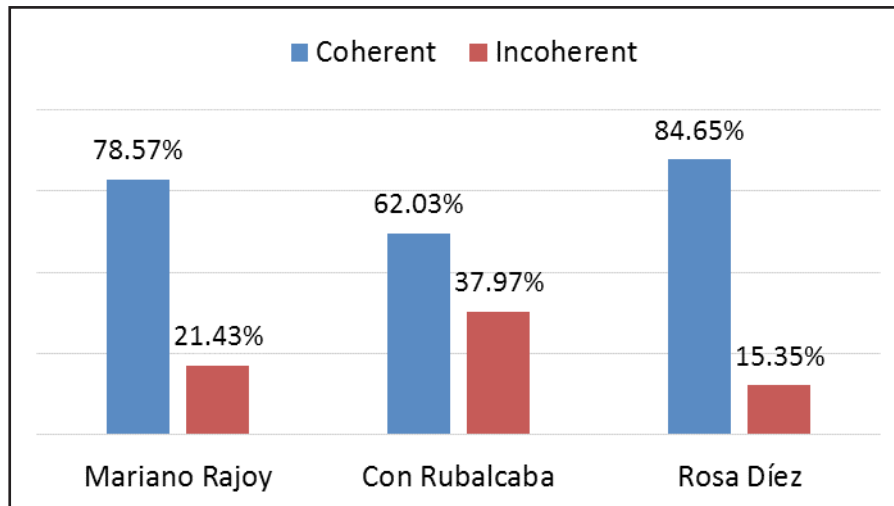


Figure 2.
Coherence by candidate



platforms for content they have created elsewhere (i.e., personal blogs, websites, etc.). That is, incoherent comments mostly serve individual purposes.

Moreover, the largest number of incoherent comments in the case of Rubalcaba's profile needs to be interpreted in light of his higher publication rate in comparison with the other two candidates. As previously outlined, he posted more intensively than the other two candidates, and many of these posts were merely informative. This might have influenced the commenting dynamics of his followers, who were less systematically invited to collectively debate on specific issues, and therefore showed higher levels of incoherence even when commenting on posts that were conceived to foster discussion.

The comments on Rosa Díez showed the highest level of coherence, close to those on the wall of Rajoy, and clearly above those on Rubalcaba's profile, which deviate much more often from the issues proposed. In other words, conversations in Rosa Díez's profile (a candidate of a minor party) show the highest level of both ideological and thematic cohesion, while the dialogues on Rajoy and Rubalcaba's profile (candidates of major parties) present slightly lower levels of both variables. Taken together, these results suggest that the conversations on Díez's wall were more often held among party activists, who are more willing to debate on public issues, compared to those hosted on the walls of candidates belonging to larger parties, where thematic and ideological cohesion is not so intense.

Argumentation

The findings show that an overwhelming (and quite evenly distributed) majority of participants do not provide any reasoning for the claims they make (Figure 3). Indeed, quite the opposite occurs: most users join

the dialogues to express individual preferences, but have no intention of rationally justifying their specific points of view.

Taken together with the results on ideological diversity, these findings suggest that most of the users participate in the candidates' walls to convey their ideological support in a rather vague way (Sweetser and Lariscy 2010). In other words, these third spaces mostly attract activists' non-reasoned support messages during the campaign, as suggested by previous research (Camaj et al. 2009; Camaj and Santana 2015).

Only a very small number of users engages in rational discussion and provides reasoned claims and, more remarkably, practically none delivers evidence to support their claims. In that sense, both the presence of argumentation and the absence of evidence are quite evenly distributed among candidates' profiles. However, the profile with the highest proportion of reasoned comments is that of Rosa Díez, whose participants engage more often in rational argumentation than those commenting on the walls of the other two candidates. Indeed, the results indicate that political talk on Díez's profile is more ideologically homogeneous, coherent and rational-oriented.

Reciprocity

The findings on reciprocity clearly show that these online forums, despite being hosted in the profiles of political candidates, are mostly dominated by citizens, since the candidates very rarely take part in them (Figure 4). The data demonstrate that Rajoy (PP) and Rubalcaba (PSOE), in particular, do not engage in political talk with citizens. Instead, their activity consists of content moderation and agenda setting (Camaj and Santana 2015). However, the UPyD

candidate, Rosa Díez, does occasionally respond to Facebook users, though in a very small proportion. Reciprocity among candidates and citizens is therefore very infrequent.

Regarding soft reciprocity among the participants themselves, the data show that at least a minority of users formally speaks to each other. That is, users interact with each other more than they do with candidates, especially those posting on the socialist profile. It should be noted, however, that the discussions on Rajoy's and Díez's profile score more poorly in terms of users' responses.

However, if we take a closer look at these interactions, it becomes clear that only a minority of them incorporate arguments provided by other participants in previous comments. Argument incorporation is less frequent than users responding to each other formally, except for the case of Rosa Díez's wall, where, surprisingly, users tend to incorporate arguments more often than to respond to each other. Again, this is probably a result of the fact that Díez's conversations are more dominated by party activists who share ideological stances, so that it is easier to find argument incorporation in intra-ideological discussions where no fundamental disagreement is to be found.

Figure 3.
Argumentation by candidate

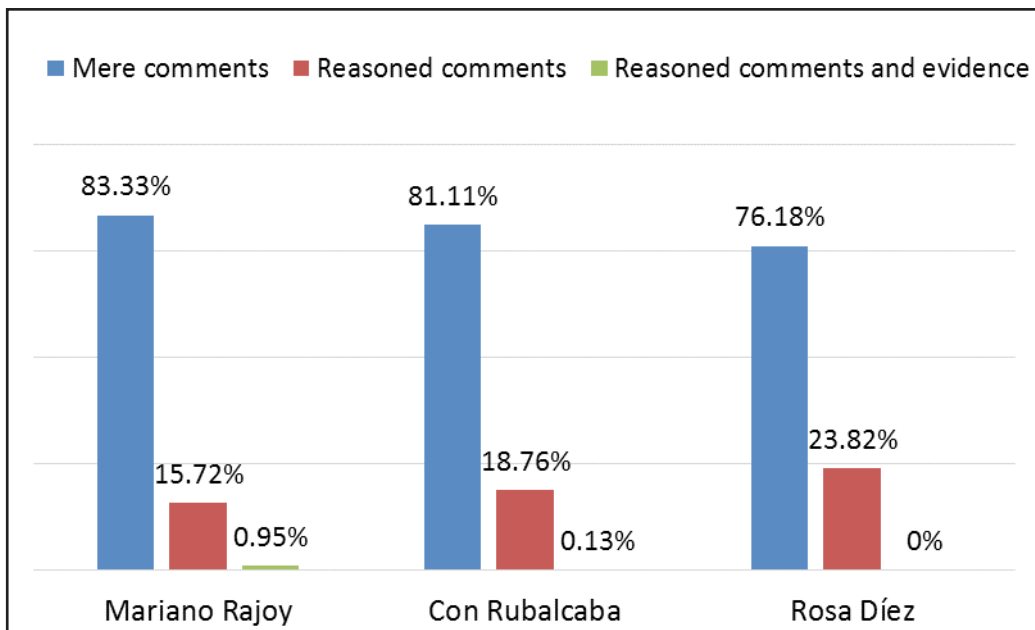
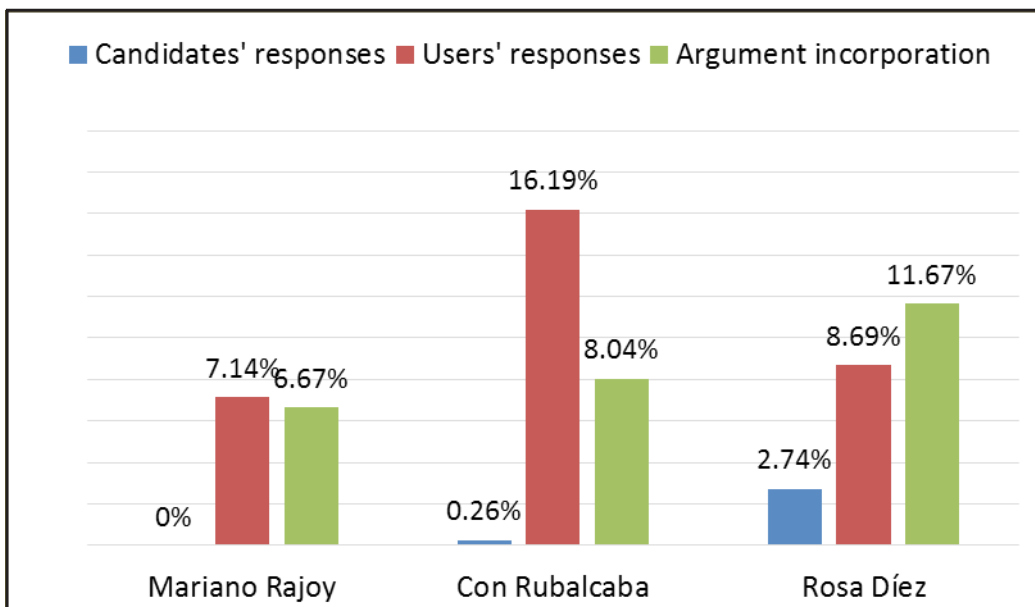


Figure 4.
Reciprocity by candidate



In sum, the vast majority of commentators in all three analyzed profiles do not show any intention to exchange points of view or arguments. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have shown the lack of responsiveness and listening of online political discussions (Wilhelm 1998; Dumoulin 2002; Jensen 2003; Valera 2012). Interestingly enough, monologue is much more frequent than dialogue in online political talk (Freelon 2010). All of this suggests that users mostly take part in these online spaces to make their voices heard by both political candidates and other users (but not to take part in rational argumentation).

Discursive freedom

Finally, the results on discursive freedom demonstrate that most commentators use a neutral and respectful language (Figure 5). Moreover, discursive freedom is quite evenly distributed among profiles, since harsh language is marginal in all of them.

Still, some slight differences should be noted. The discussions on Rosa Díez’s profile score higher in discursive freedom, since there is almost no room for harsh language, insults or flaming in these conversations. These results are probably associated with higher ideological homophily, since like-minded people are less likely to engage in flaming and uncivil behavior.

Rajoy’s and Rubalcaba’s walls, however, include some small proportion of uncivil behavior in their conversations, so that discursive freedom in these spaces is more restricted. This is probably related to the

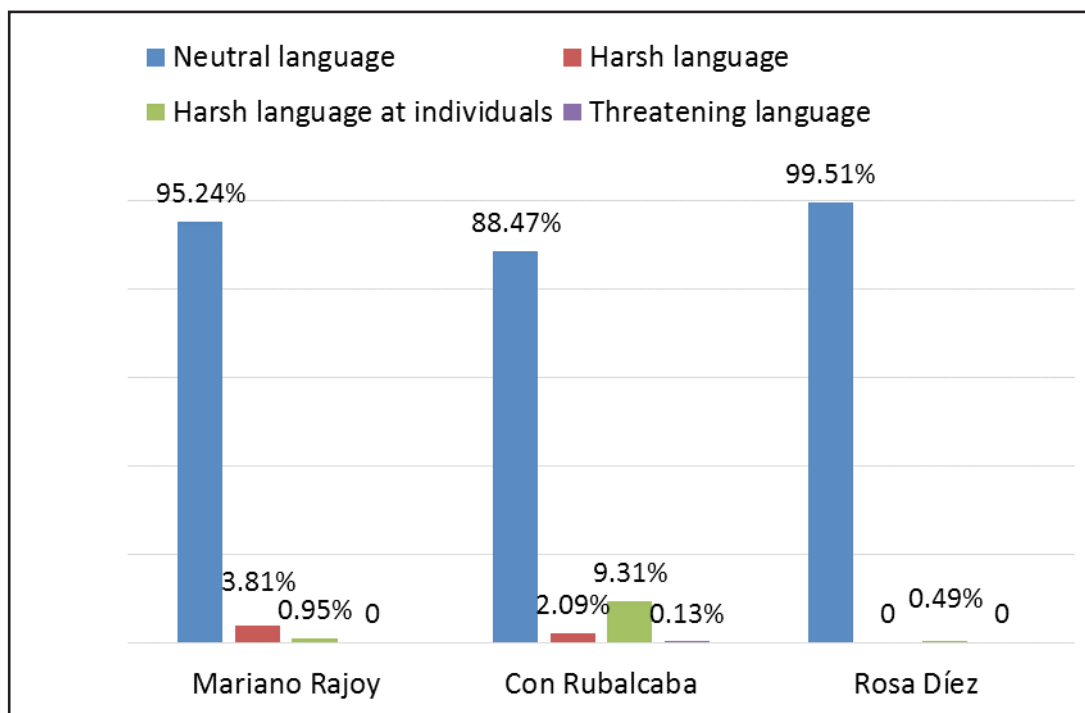
presence of disagreement, which leads more easily to cross-cutting dialogues and confrontation.

DISCUSSION

Our results clearly show that discussions are overall characterized by strong ideological homogeneity, infrequent argumentation, very limited reciprocal interaction, moderate coherence and outstanding rates of discursive freedom. These findings point out that political talk on the Facebook profiles of Spanish political candidates is not oriented towards rational or critical argumentation, as ideally conceived by deliberative theorists. Our findings are consistent with previous research regarding ideological homogeneity (Fernandes et al. 2010; Valera 2012), the scarce presence of reasoned claims (Sweetser and Lariscy 2008; Camaj and Santana 2015), lack of responsiveness (Wilhelm 1998; Dumoulin 2002; Jensen 2003) and civility (Camaj et al. 2009; Camaj and Santana 2015).

Despite this limited “deliberative quality”, our findings also reveal that these conversations feature some democratic value. First, the predominance of monologue indicates that these online forums mostly serve individual purposes, like self-expression, and sporadic contact with political representatives. In this sense, they contribute to strengthening the relationship between political representatives and the citizenry by channeling support messages from the constituents to the candidates during electoral mobilization processes. That is, they offer a platform for personal expression to citizens, who are encouraged to express their political preferences on public issues.

Figure 5.
Discursive freedom by candidate



Second, the findings on coherence and discursive freedom point out that citizens generally comment on public issues using a neutral and non-offensive language. In this sense, these online forums can be conceived of as spaces for political socialization, where users take stances on public issues in a general framework of respect and tolerance. In this way, communicative interactions taking place on the Facebook profiles of candidates help enhance democratic values, such as tolerance and mutual respect.

Third, the significant presence of ideological homogeneity (or fragmentation) across candidates' walls suggests that these online forums function as ideological niches for supporters and activists to gather and express their shared political preferences in very favorable discursive conditions. In other words, they allow for the cultivation of social cohesion and group identity, thus reinforcing community ties among party members and sympathizers. Despite the dangers associated with ideological homophily (such as group polarization, social isolation or radicalization), the absence of fundamental disagreement is also important for the construction of specific narratives and position statements among both emerging and established ideological communities.

Moreover, some opinions can only be expressed in the context of fundamental ideological agreement, where the social and psychological costs of dissenting are significantly lower. Otherwise, they would most likely be silenced under other discursive conditions. This is the case of minority opinions in particular, which tend to be marginalized in the general public sphere. In other words, the absence of fundamental disagreement in these online spaces especially favors the emergence and consolidation of minority ideological communities, as is the case of UPyD. As a result, these ideological niches contribute to democratic pluralism by enhancing the construction and consolidation of different political organizations.

In fact, our findings provisionally suggest that discussions serve slightly different democratic functions depending on the size of the party (and its relevance in the political system) where they take place. As we have previously pointed out, the conversations on Rosa Díez's wall (the candidate of a minor Spanish party) score higher in ideological homogeneity, argumentation, coherence, reciprocity and discursive freedom. In contrast, the discussions on the two major Spanish candidates (Rajoy and Rubalcaba) present slightly more ideological diversity, but less argumentation, coherence, reciprocity and discursive freedom.

These results suggest that the democratic value of online political talk might vary depending on the size of the party where it takes place. In conversations on the profiles of candidates belonging to hegemonic parties (such as the PP and the PSOE), citizens rarely display argumentative and reciprocal

interaction, but they are occasionally confronted with diversity. They mainly constitute platforms for self-expression, where users exhibit their support to candidates. But the candidates' media visibility fosters the attraction of some heterogeneous voices to their Facebook profiles, so that individuals are sometimes exposed to dissent.

In discussions taking place in the profile of candidates belonging to minor parties (such as UPyD), however, discussions can be easily conceived as "enclave deliberations" (Sunstein 2001), since they completely lack ideological diversity. Argumentation and reciprocity are, nevertheless, more frequent, since they arise in the context of intra-ideological discussions, that is, they feature higher levels of in-group interaction. These discussions are more vulnerable to group polarization and radicalization, but they allow for the expression and debate of ideas that would not emerge in other discursive conditions.

CONCLUSION

This article constitutes an effort to assess the democratic value of online political talk during the Spanish General Election of 2011. To do so, we have analyzed the conversations hosted on the Facebook profiles of Spanish political candidates. Our findings clearly demonstrate that online political discussions on this social network do not meet the normative standards proposed by deliberative theorists, insofar as the essential conditions for deliberation (such as discursive diversity, argumentation or reciprocity) score very poorly. But instead of interpreting these results from a pessimistic perspective that neglects any democratic benefit of the online political discussions analyzed, we contend that such discussions serve democratic functions beyond those associated with deliberative democracy.

First, they channel the need for self-expression of politically interested individuals, who comment on public issues and convey their support for candidates during electoral mobilization processes, thereby contributing to increasing their feelings of political efficacy. Second, they are overwhelmingly characterized by civility, which allows us to conceive them as spaces for political socialization, where citizens encounter and are socialized in democratic values like tolerance and mutual respect. Third, they work as ideological niches that help reinforce social cohesion and build group identity among party activists and sympathizers, thus strengthening the consolidation of both emerging and established political organizations and, more generally, help preserve pluralism.

The democratic benefits of online political conversations discussed above do not stem from their deliberative quality, but instead correspond to other democratic traditions, such as liberal-individualism or communitarianism. In this sense, we firmly be-

lieve that political communication scholars should overcome the cyber-optimist vs. cyber-pessimist theoretical schism that has led most researchers to use deliberative notions to examine political talk, and move towards a more diversified and complete analytical framework when examining the democratic value of online discussions (Freelon 2010; Wright 2011). One possible way to do this is to design metrics derived from different democratic notions, like liberal-individualism or communitarianism, in order to comprehend more accurately the benefits of these spontaneous interactions among citizens. A good starting point would be Freelon's (2010) work which operationalizes different democratic traditions to be applied to online political talk.

Finally, our results provisionally suggest that the democratic value of online political discussion depends on the context, that is, it slightly varies depending on the party's size where it takes place. We have limited our analysis to the Facebook profiles of three Spanish political candidates; two of whom belong to the two hegemonic Spanish political parties (PP and PSOE) and the third who belongs to a minor and more recent political organization (UPyD). This comparative approach has allowed us to observe that online political discussions were slightly different

depending on the size of the party where they took place as was their democratic value.

The conversations on the walls of the hegemonic candidates were slightly more oriented towards self-expression and featured some ideological diversity, thus allowing citizens to express political preferences, but also sporadically exposing them to diversity. Moreover, the political talk hosted by the minor candidate lacked fundamental disagreement but it showed more in-group interaction (in terms of argumentation and reciprocity). Its democratic value therefore focused more on reinforcing internal cohesion, fostering intra-ideological debate, and allowing for the collective construction of specific narratives.

Finally, future studies will have to confirm through larger samples and more sophisticated methodological approaches if the differences found among conversation dynamics between hegemonic versus minor parties are statistically significant and generalizable to other political and social contexts beyond the Spanish case. In any case, our results illustrate that research on online political talk needs to overcome the cyber-optimist vs. cyber-pessimist debate and provide more specific and empirically grounded accounts on how these online interactions among citizens are valuable to democracy.

NOTES

- 1 from the article "Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media" originally published by Evgeny Morozov in *New Republic* February 5th 2013. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112189/social-media-doesnt-always-help-social-movements>
- 2 It is worth noting that UPyD was a relatively young political force back in 2011 that was founded in 2007 by a former socialist leader, Rosa Díez, and different anti-terrorism civic associations and citizen groups coming from the Basque socialist left. Despite winning a seat

in Congress in 2008 and expanding its representation after the local and regional elections in 2011, its economic and organizational assets could not be compared with those of the PP and the PSOE.

- 3 In fact, this study is conducted under the framework of the R&D project "Communication flows in processes of political mobilization: the media, blogs and opinion leaders" (Ministry of the Economy and Competitiveness, 2014-2016) directed by Guillermo López García, reference number CSO2013-43960-R.

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