

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF POPULISM AND MEDIATIZATION¹

LA COMUNICACIÓN POLÍTICA EN LA ERA DE LOS POPULISMOS Y DE LA MEDIATIZACIÓN

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| Abstract |

The loss of credibility of mainstream political parties, the mistrust over the traditional sources of information, the rise of social media in the public scenario, and the ideological polarization splitting states into different sides seem to be the most recent personality of our democracy. Through this study, we will understand to what extent populist rhetoric affects our decisions in both the civic and personal sphere. Are we owners of our mindset, or are we just victims of the filter bubble?

For this purpose, we have used qualitative methodology by carrying out 4 focus groups with young university students to learn about their political tendencies and understand why they adopt these political positions today, and we have also studied classic sources and other reference sources on this issue to extract information and knowledge from them. The results of these focus groups can be found in Chapter 3.

After investigating the basic concepts of political communication and explaining the factors of populism and mediatization that we are experiencing today, we must go further to study whether this ideological fragmentation of states should concern us, and more importantly, whether it is going to increase in Spain. For this, a very important factor is the youth, since are the new generations on whom the future of politics and ideological bias depend.

Keywords: “political polarization”; “democracy”; “new populist political parties”; “social networks”; “post-truth”; “politic communication”.

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| Resumen |

La pérdida de credibilidad de los partidos políticos mayoritarios, la desconfianza en las fuentes tradicionales de información, el auge de los medios sociales en el escenario público y la polarización ideológica que divide a los estados en diferentes bandos parecen ser la personalidad más reciente de nuestra democracia. A través de este estudio, entenderemos hasta qué punto la retórica populista afecta a nuestras decisiones tanto en el ámbito cívico como en el personal. ¿Somos dueños de nuestra mentalidad o sólo somos víctimas de la burbuja de los filtros?

Para ello, se ha recurrido a la metodología cualitativa haciendo 4 focus group a jóvenes universitarios para conocer sus tendencias políticas y entender por qué adoptan hoy en día esas posiciones políticas, y también se han estudiado fuentes clásicas y otras de referencia sobre este asunto para extraer al hilo de ellas información y conocimientos. Los resultados de estos están recogidos a partir del capítulo 3. RESULTADOS.

Después de indagar en los conceptos básicos de la comunicación política y de explicar los factores del populismo y la mediatización que vivimos en la actualidad, debemos ir más allá para estudiar si esta fragmentación ideológica de los estados debe preocuparnos y, lo que es más importante, si va a aumentar en España. Para ello, un factor muy importante es la juventud, ya que son las nuevas generaciones de las que depende el futuro de la política y el sesgo ideológico.

Palabras clave: polarización política, democracia, nuevos partidos populistas, redes sociales, post verdad, comunicación política.

| Introduction |

It is a moment of history where information has been democratized, which means that we can have access to a greater or lesser extent to all types of communication, being able to have at our fingertips any event that has happened in the world immediately. However, why do we talk about the rise of polarization when we should find more neutral positions?

In the words of Marías (1955, p. 18) "the reality of society comes from what has gone before", and in this case, we precede a century of totalitarianisms, where democracies emerged as a turning point in history. The recent rise of populist parties in Europe, makes us think that besides being able to consider history as a cyclical event, we fail to learn from the previous circumstances, tending to repeat them with the new resources we possess. Otherwise, the mediatization of political life will continue to spread, with devastating effects for individuals, families, public and private institutions, societies and countries. What do we mean by mediatization of political life?

To try to answer this question, we turn to the first meaning of the RAE (2021) of the verb **mediatize**, which says: To intervene by hindering or impeding the freedom of action of a person or institution in the exercise of their activities or functions. Eliseo Verón's contribution is also interesting when he reminds us that media phenomena began centuries ago, one can speak of them since the origin of humanity. In his words: "mediatization is only the name for the long historical sequence of institutionalized media phenomena in human societies and their multiple consequences" (Verón, 2014, p. 175).

In a synthetic and only enunciative way here, we warn that today in the West, but also in the countries of Africa and Asia (which we will not go into), there is a clear and very serious interference in the ability of the person to exercise with freedom and responsibility the issues of daily life, and this is not only affecting any person in their personal life or entity in their daily life but also in their political circumstances. There is a disorientation in some cases caused by interest groups and lobbies as a result of their intellectual error; and on other occasions this disorientation is caused by other interest groups and lobbies, including political parties, which only want to manipulate people, families, institutions and countries for their own benefit. Both realities are not new, we only have to stop in the twentieth century to observe their background and their devastating consequences, of which we only mention two examples: civil wars and the two world wars.

The investigation about this issue arises from the search for a clear answer regarding the emergence and support of new populist political parties. It is essential to understand the role of each of the factors that constitute political communication these days, and what kind of discourses manipulate the vote and the behavior of, as Ortega y Gasset would refer to, the masses.

The role of social networks will be analyzed here as the main agent of influence in the definition of extreme ideas in society, explaining either if we are really victims of echo chambers and selective exposure, or accomplices in the diffusion of this type of dialectic, answering the question of whether we are really aware of the filter bubble in which we live trapped and if we make any effort to get out of it.

As a consequence of this, for centuries and as was clearly demonstrated throughout the 20th century, in order for us to grow on a personal, family, institutional, social, national and international level, it is now urgent to form a critical conscience that goes from the individual to the international level, including the aforementioned families, institutions, societies and countries, in everything related to collective life with political transcendence. Otherwise, tragedies such as those experienced by our ancestors in the 20th century may be reproduced. As an example, we are seeing it with the refusal of people and groups to be vaccinated against the Covid virus without any health or scientific cause to justify it.

| Methodology |

The methodology used for the study is based on 4 focus groups, each simulating the performance of an echo chamber, in this way we can study how the group polarization process works and at the same time, we can discuss different actuality topics related with the field of study with university students. We will be assisted by a group of university students, who will be in the situation of discussing certain issues related to the current political scene in a focus group. In this way, we will be able to draw conclusions regarding what ideas young people have about different current issues, the methods they use to filter information, and to what extent their level of studies and interest in a topic makes them more or less vulnerable to external influences derived on the polarization of society, such as

populist speeches or the different algorithms that pigeonhole us into an ideology in our social media.

We are witnessing a system of political leadership that is candidate-driven instead of program-driven. Voting is no longer based on content but on what the political leader shows, his rhetoric and image. Political organizations are gradually becoming more vertical and personal. Likewise, to the same extent that the voters vote for the politician rather than for the policies, the elections' fate would fall specially on the candidate (Canel, 2008). For this reason, political communication is a fundamental pillar for the success of any political exercise, as results will be directly linked to the performance of the leader around the established political communication strategy.

According to Denton and Woodward (1990, p. 14), political communication is about: "the discussion related to the allocation of public resources (revenues), official authority (who is given the power to make legal, legislative, and executive decisions), and official sanctions (what the state rewards or punishes)".

This definition includes written and verbal political rhetoric, but not symbolic communication acts, which McNair (2017) considers growing significance for the understanding of the political process as a whole.

Other authors put forward a more comprehensive definition of 'political language', showing that it not only includes rhetorical language signs such as body language, but it also includes political actions such as boycotts and protest (Graber, 1981). Furthermore, we should address a critical factor of political communication: intentionality. The intention behind the political communication strategy is key to the campaign's success, as it is the way the senders (leaders and politicians) are going to influence the political environment (Denton and Woodward 1990).

The political communication for McNair includes:

- a) All forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives.
- b) Communication addresses these actors by non-politicians such as voters and activists.
- c) Communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussions of politics, such as blogs and social media posts. McNair (2017, p. 4)

Three agent groups are implicated in the political message. These three elements are the political organizations, the media, and the citizens as the audience.

Most of the literature narrows the definition of a political organization to a variety of non-profit organizations, including parties involved in one way or another in the political process. They range from political parties and committees that put forward candidates for elections

to anti-establishment and movement groups that challenge the status quo of the political system (Dimitrov, 2009).

The main actors of the political organizations are the so-called 'political actors' (McNair, 2017). They can pursue this by gaining institutional political power in government or constitutional assemblies through which their preferred policies can be implemented. If they are in opposition, their goal will be to block the existing power holders and replace them with alternatives. This group includes institutions such as political parties, public relations, public organizations, pressure groups, or terrorist organizations.

The media is also known as the fourth estate or power, behind the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, as they have significant influence over the social and political affairs of a state. They are the transmitters of the political 'reality' from citizens to their political leaders and vice-versa, as media claim to represent the public opinion.

According to Kaid et al. (1991), there are three categories that comprises the political 'reality':

- a) An *objective* political 'reality', comprising political events as they actually occur.
- b) A *subjective* 'reality' of political events as actors and citizens perceive them.
- c) And a *constructed* 'reality', which is critical to the shaping of subjective perceptions and refers to those events covered by the media.

The opinion is one of the great regulators of collective life, and social coexistence, as well as economy, politics, and culture in general, are based on the dynamics of opinions (Marias, 1955). It's imperative to differentiate between *particular* and *private* opinion and *general* and *public* opinion.

Public opinion are the opinions and predispositions of ordinary people in the public sphere that are taken —or at least should be taken— by those who exercise power or will to exercise it in public. It can be considered the opinion of society as a whole, and it also comprehends a minority and singular opinions as well as popular opinions. However, public opinion does not cease to be an opinion. The opinion is not a synonym of truth. Opinions are partial, they are dyed in colors, they come and go. The majority of citizens make decisions based on subjective arguments, and the limited real knowledge, self-interest, and the propaganda of the media related to the different political, religious, and commercial powers are responsible for this.

According to Ortega y Gasset (1929), public opinion is not something static and immovable; indeed, it can be influenced thanks to "a technique". Populists leaders worldwide use this type of mechanism to influence the masses, recently usually via social media, to achieve their political and personal goals.

Political actors search for specific behavior in society to reach their objective through their speeches or political advertising, and the effects of these are measured in different ways depending on the goal itself or the expected response. It can be examined at two levels:

Micro-level: if we want a more individual response to the message.

b) *Macro-level:* if we want results from the public opinion, by using polls and other indices of collective political will.

To evaluate the effects of political communication, we should also study how the mass media increasingly influence the political process of a democratic society. For this reason, it is essential to understand the patterns of voting behavior through the concept of mediatization.

Butler and Kavanagh observed that:

More than ever, election campaigns are managed and orchestrated. Each party attempts to shape the agenda so that the media reflects its views on favorite topics. Public opinion is monitored through opinion polls. An election campaign is increasingly seen by those in charge as an exercise in marketing and many of the skill of selling goods and services to customers are now applied to the electorate. (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992, p. 77)

Governments and political actors leave to the side the ideologies and value system to follow the recommendations of market researchers. So instead of looking for the good of the society and the future of it, since the rise of democracies, it is more common to find mere political objectives such as gaining popularity, turning the activity of political persuasion into a cynical response to what this week's poll say (McNair, 2017).

An important factor that affects political communication and, consequently, has effects on the audience is the denominated 'mediatization thesis'. This asserts that all political actors are more and more subject to the media and are committed to yield to the logic of media production, distribution and reception (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). But what are the consequences of mediatization?

Not all the information that circulates is truthful, on the contrary, nowadays it is very difficult to find objective media. There is a lot of toxic and manipulated opinion, with the mere purpose of influencing under certain interests. Quality information is less accessible to the public, as these media usually charge a subscription to access this content. In addition, given the situation, there is an obligation to create new media exclusively for the confirmation of viral information or the denial of hoaxes that run through the Internet. (Hjarvard, 2013, pp. 61-62)

The effects of mediatization are dangerous for the veracity of the information shared. There is a growing distrust of political factors and the press that discredits their work due to the constant and unstoppable flow of misleading information. That is why some authors refer to this period as the era of 'post-truth' politics, that according to the Cambridge Dictionary this

term refers “to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts”. The concept is commonly used since 2016 due to some events such as the proposal of the Brexit or the arrival of Trump to the White House, as are considered episodes where there has been a deliberate distortion of reality in which objective facts have less influence than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs, in order to create and shape public opinion and influence social attitudes.

Recently, there has been a growth of populism in European politics. Many believe that the key to populist success is connected to the way populism is communicated. To find out its veracity, we are going to study populism as a communication phenomenon. Populist communication is recognized by certain types of arguments. Common for all populist communication is the reference to the will of the people. This is based on a belief that the people share one will. The will of the people is typically contrasted with the will of the corrupt or immoral elite or various threatening minorities.

The term ‘populism’ has been used to describe various phenomena encompassing strategies, movements, political parties and governments. The corrupt elite is usually composed by different groups, among them the foreigners (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004), which are considered horizontal enemies of the people. On the other hand, the term ‘the people’ is referred to the masses.

Many specialized scholars date the beginnings of populism to the end of the 19th century, as a movement that emerged in Russia and the United States. Later, the phenomenon spread to Spanish-American, probably the territory where populism stands out the most, as it is where it has been the most long-lasting and frequent among its countries. Large socio-economic inequalities coupled with relatively long democratic periods would explain why populism is the main ideology in many Spanish-American countries (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

In contrast, Europe does not have a long history of populism. Limited agrarian movements arose at the start of the twentieth century, but they were often suppressed by nationalist movements (Mudde, 2012). In reaction to this phenomenon, several political parties appeared in the 1980s, often as a result of the social protests that had developed in the previous decade. Despite the fact that nationalist populism was not fundamental to their ideology, environmentalist parties used it to attract the public's interest. The radical right's movements, which had formerly been known for their elitism, reinvented themselves in the mid-1980s and introduced themselves as the people's advocates and voice (Moffitt, 2016). While the first nationalist parties in Europe, such as the Flemish Bloc (VB) in Belgium and the National Front (FN) in France, were able to gain parliamentary seats in the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that they started to have a significant impact on European politics. In 1994, the Italian Northern League (LN) became the first populist party to enter parliament, followed by the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in 2000 (Mudde, 2011).

According to a study made by Gidron and Hall (2017), economy and the subjective social status, influenced by other factors such as education, racial privilege and gender, affect directly

to the understanding of populism as a phenomenon. They explain that these trends tend to arise lately due to the economic and cultural developments that had been manifesting in democracies over the past 30 years. Many of the explanations proposed to explain the rise of populism focus on its economic context. Although different causal factors are listed, they often have similar arguments: developments such as globalization, technological progress or the financial crisis (Margalit, 2019) have changed the labor market and led to widespread economic chaos and insecurity.

Before the 1990s, populism was often correlated with fiscally 'irresponsible' deficit spending policies. Nevertheless, during the early 1990s, the emergence of 'neoliberal' populist leaders in Latin America, such as Alberto Fujimori, Carlos Menem, and Fernando Collor de Mello, prompted a paradigm change, instigating prominent scholars to exclude economic policies from the list of required dimensions for defining populism (Weyland, 1996).

The modern democratic Trinity consists of judges, the media, and public opinion. According to Minc (1995), we live in a demoscropy democracy, in which leaders act according to a study of the opinions and behaviors of the population through opinion polls and surveys. Appealing to Tocqueville, public opinion would be like the invisible hand of all democracies. But, is the politician the one that reads the public opinion, or just the one that applies it to the democratic system?

At the end, the politicians are guided by the press, that are the ones in charge of interpreting the opinion polls. Journalists tend to express the general interest and the will of the people, and the deputies through that information, adapt their programs to the public opinion to be seen as an equal and gain the trust of the people. In this way, the populist politician faces the press as a real competitor, trying always to impose their opinions over the press, and make it appear that their discourse is the truly public opinion instead of the press version, which is influenced by the corrupt elites. In this new society, according to Minc (1995), legal reason and political reason do not coincide, and the former ends up imposing itself.

Every populist claim to be the voice of the people. But who are these people, and what are their problems? We can consider that it varies depending on the type of populist, which among all the classifications, we can distinguish two main types that are very well defined in almost every state of Europe: the left-wing populism and the right-wing populism. The discourses of both have a pretty similar scheme, in which they defend certain values they consider necessary for the proper development of democracy, and also incriminates some attitudes of their opponents. We can find both right and left-wing populism in Europe today:

- a) Right: Ukip (UK); Progress Party (Norway); Sweden Democrats (Sweden); True Finns (Finland); Freedom Party (The Netherlands); Vlaams Belang (Belgium); Front National (France); Austria Freedom Party (Austria); Order, Law and Justice (Bulgaria); The Ataka Party (Bulgaria); Fidesz (Hungary); The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Bosnia and Herzegovina); Golden Dawn (Greece); Lega Nord (Italy); Vox (Spain).

b) Left: The Socialist Party (The Netherlands); Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany); Syriza (Greece); Five Star Movement (Italy); Podemos (Spain).

Populists have traditionally operated on the fringes of politics. What is clear, is that populist leaders are exceptional communicators and spokespersons. They all follow a very charismatic track, being able to persuade hundreds of people through their speeches even though their discourse is not as scientific and exact as it should be. Here, the term “charm” differs greatly from its meaning decades ago. During the last century and before, a charismatic person was considered to be one who set an example with his life, his way of behaving and who was wise from honesty. A great role charismatic model is the figure of Nelson Mandela.

There are plenty of examples in which a populist leader has resorted to other issues or objects of dialogue separate from politics as a strategy for improving their political position or achieve a specific goal. For instance, it is very well-known that Silvio Berlusconi, the populist leader of Forza Italia, the right-wing party that stayed in the Italian political scenario from 1994 to 2009, tended to resort to soccer to clean up his image and distract the press and public opinion from his multiple scandals (Donofrio, 2012).

Another example of populist strategy as a political style will be the statements of the German right-wing populist party ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ in 2016, in which they confess that their discourse should be, in a conscious and deliberative way, even more politically incorrect than the rest of the parties if they want to reach a higher impact on the people (Harkort, 2019).

Every day there are more and more cases of populist strategies from parties not only of a populist nature, but of all characters, which resort to these methods to attract attention and become the talk of the town. The issue with this, is not only the influence on the people and the repercussion it could make on the masses, but also the fade between the populist and the mainstream parties. It gets more difficult to differentiate them, as both are starting to use populism as a political style, but what we can appreciate is that people are starting to polarize, and extremisms are rising in Europe in the guise of democracy and freedom. But, how are the arguments populist leaders use different from the way mainstream political parties communicate to persuade the people?

We could say that the main difference is the closeness to the people and the fight against the elites. Populism is becoming an anti-elite discourse in the name of a legitimate state (Aslanidis, 2016). The value of the cultural elites lay in their willingness to assume responsibility for the binding norms without which civilization is impossible. These elites lived in the service of demanding ideals, and according to Ortega y Gasset (1929), this movement of delegitimization of the elites in Europe is due to the fact that they have neglected their responsibilities. Whereas the world has seemed to have globalized in recent decades, the coexistence of isolated compartments is a direct indication of, on the one hand, societal disintegration, and on the other hand, the inability of certain pressure groups rooted in their roles not to abandon their comfort zones and interests, avoiding breaking down prejudices and egocentrism (Carmona, 2020).

According to Harkort (2019), the populist discourse uses the simplest language, so that the masses can understand it correctly, and can find politics as something related to their lives, instead of feeling like outsiders. In this way, the people will claim for their rights and for the interests the populist leader has transmitted to them. For complex problems, simple solutions are proposed and communicated. There is also a strong effort aimed at rehabilitating terms that are historically stigmatized, such as the German word “*völkisch*”, referred to ‘the people’ with a very nationalistic connotation.

Another interesting characteristic of the populist attitude towards the people is the so-called ‘*Zelig effect*’, which according to Donofrío (2012), Berlusconi is a good example of this phenomenon. The effect consists on mimic the personality of those who surround you, pretending to appear like one of them.

For instance, Marine Le Pen, president of the Front National since 2011, the right-wing populist French party, also uses techniques to get close to the people. According to Harkort (2019), she uses almost exclusively her first name, Marine. In fact, the party's program for 2017 is entitled *Marine 2017* and does not mention the Front National, Marine is the party.

This phenomenon is not exclusive from the right-wing populism, as a matter of fact, Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, the Spanish left-wing populist party, also uses the closeness to the people as main part of his strategy (Alonso-Muñoz y Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

Polarization seems to have divided countries into two, in which it appears that each side gets information concerning their partisan ideas through just a few sources that act according to their ideology (Gentzkow, 2017). Although the media often disagrees with populist arguments, they are still attracted to populism. But why? Because populist arguments tend to simplify complex issues and focus on conflict, opposition, and drama. The media likes to present content with conflicts and dramas that are not easy to understand.

Sometimes, the media also acts as a populist. This will happen if the media sees itself as the voice of the people and constantly blames and attacks the elite or minorities for the people's problems. On the contrary, populists are rarely attracted by the media. They use important media reports as evidence to prove that we are against them. In contrast to classical politics, the Alternative für Deutschland and Front National parties are more media-oriented and responsive to journalistic demand, as they follow a communicative strategy that relies on dramatization, personalization and disruptive messages (Harkort, 2019).

According to a study made by Groshek & Koc-Michalska (2017), social media has directly and indirectly helped cultivate support for populist leaders during election period, for instance, in the USA presidential elections of 2016, these platforms were crucial for the results and even the former president Donald Trump confirmed that Twitter and Facebook helped him win (McCormick, 2016).

The current political landscape has become a game where anything goes, and political imposition is camouflaged as influence, using different techniques of manipulation through

mediatization. This situation can be reached in many ways, not necessarily through terror and police intimidation, but also through concealment or manipulation of information, corruption of the judicial system and paralysis of the educational system. "In our time, if there is to be a dictatorship, it has to be a media dictatorship and not a political one" (Eco, 2010, p. 161). According to Ceron (2015), the absence of editorial censorship causes new content and non-mainstream views to thrive on social media.

Regarding a study made by Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés (2018), the more information released by populist political leaders, the smaller the impact on the public through Twitter. Users will not prioritize the amount of money in the exchange activities of populist political leaders in this digital platform. Compared with RT, users prefer to interact with leaders through FAV. The digital world would not allow the nationalist political message to be more diverse and widely disseminated. Populist leaders want to be seen as viable electoral alternatives capable of ruling and, as a result, to be considered in upcoming elections. The amount of RT and FAV they get on every post is inversely proportional to the total number of messages revealed. That is, as the number of released tweets grows, the public's interest decreases, and vice versa.

We are facing the advent of BigData and a new algorithmic culture that goes beyond a simple technological issue and whose datafication process brings with its new and opaque regimes of control, discrimination and exclusion (Rúas y Capdevila, 2017). This generates a series of technopolitical distortions, with new forms of repression and algorithmic citizen resistance (Treré, 2016). That is the reason why we should be aware of the selective exposure we are unconsciously submitted and try to scape from the filter bubbles and echo chambers that limits our knowledge to what the algorithm thinks we are more close to (Pariser, 2011). Having information contrast and an open mind is key for a good personal and intelligent ideological criterion.

Definitely, and according to Carmona (2020), the mass media requires a deep meditation work in order to be self-examined, as well as the media and social public opinion groups have to make a process of self-criticism that frees them from their prejudices, particular interests and help them realize which are the common circumstances they share with the majority of people and institutions. This lack of self-criticism and meditation are two of the reasons that explain the strong resurgence of nationalism that we are currently experiencing. From the arrival of Trump in the United States along with his hate speeches, to the closest example, the Catalan pro-independence movement in Spain.

| Results |

The main objective of the study is to make an approximation of the position of the average young Spaniards in the face of the current situation of political polarization. In order to do so, we will be able to see how this ideological bias is produced and to foresee if it can go further or if it is simply a punishment by the public opinion to the mainstream parties to see the change they promise in each campaign. These topics have been chosen because they are basic to understanding the position of these groups of Spanish university students, which we

can describe as average. In order to go deeper, we are aware that it would be necessary to carry out a much more in-depth investigation with all that it would entail (human and economic resources, time, methodology, field selection of the sample, etc.).

In this way we raise 3 questions:

Q1: Is there really a vulnerability on the part of young people to switch to an extreme ideology quickly and easily?

Q2: How do echo chambers influence polarization, and why?

Q3: Does the youth contrast information or do they promote the spread of misinformation?

On the conclusion of the study, we will contrast the results to see the approximation of my thoughts. The hypotheses to the previous questions is the following:

H1: As a result of the disinformation we are subjected to, there is a certain vulnerability on the part of young people to polarization towards extremes. However that it is directly dependent on the education that each young person receives. A young person educated in the contrast of information will not be so subject to possible manipulations from the outside, but his own criteria will be the only thing that will serve to determine his ideological position. There are also other factors such as political dissatisfaction and attrition due to the lack of commitment on the part of political leaders, which influence this extreme tendency in the search for effective change.

H2: Echo chambers influence depending on what you want to be influenced by. A discerning person used to contrast all information, would not be swayed by this over- information and would base their own ideas on it. Peer pressure has always influenced the most vulnerable. If you surround yourself with a single stream of constant information where there is only one opinion, the tendency is to follow the majority to feel part of the herd.

H3: Youth are subjected to all kinds of information at all times. It is for that reason that they are used to read misleading information, and hopefully, little by little they are giving more importance to the media that are in charge of verifying information, also known as fact checkers. But it is also true that we live in the era of immediacy and sensationalism, two very dangerous factors, so there is usually a tendency to spread all kinds of information without previously studying whether it is real for the mere fact of supporting your ideas or dismantling the opposition, since everyone in their social media has the freedom to spread what they want and among young people the quick positioning is very important because they feel the need to show they are up to date with everything and have an own criteria.

The groups are composed of 6 young people between the ages of 18 and 26 years old, all of them currently studying a university degree or recently graduated. The purpose of the level of studies was mainly to ensure a richness in the dialogue and an equal footing for everyone.

Just one person from each group was subject of the study but he or she wasn't aware of this. The remaining 5 were people (confederates) with a special interest in debate and political science, were students of degrees that require a certain level of being well informed about current affairs such as journalism, international relations, law or politics.

Depending on the question, each participant's answer could be filtered in an excel sheet to position him/her in the ideological spectrum, being both 1 and 5 extreme positions and 3 neutral. By means of these surveys we were looking for subjects that matched the following pattern (see Table 3.1):

- a) Twitter users, as it is the main platform where young people get information from and where echo chambers are more evident.
- b) Two people (α and γ) who did not study the type of careers previously mentioned, since we were interested in having an average level of information, not a specialized, as we understand that not everyone has the same interest on politics and the common position is to be more or less informed about the current political situation.
- c) Two people (β and δ) who study one of the previously mentioned degrees, that show interest for politics and seem to be well informed.
- d) Two people (α and β) with an average of a moderate tendency (3 on the Likert scale).
- e) One person (γ) with a progressive tendency.
- f) One person (δ) with a conservative tendency.

At no time is the political ideology of the subjects questioned, since this is not the objective of the study and it is not considered a cross-cutting factor for the study. Simply seeks to see what level of ideological change a person can undergo when subjected to 60 minutes of selective exposure, regardless of whether they are right-wing or left-wing.

They were selected personally according to their political commitment and previous experience on university debates. They were told various conditions for participating:

- a) They must show an extreme position but not so obvious, regarding the topics to be treated, even if they don't totally agree with that ideology.
- b) Although some of them may know each other, they should behave as if they didn't to avoid situations of inequality.
- c) They had to understand that a focus group isn't a debate, it is about dialogue, not about convincing the other person.
- d) They were asked to sometimes use misleading information to reinforce their position, that will be clarified at the end of the study with the subject.

Each focus group had a specific objective and that is the reason why each has a different structure regarding the participants. On the following table we can appreciate the members of each focus group and their corresponding ideology:

FOCUS GROUP	SUBJECT	IDEOLOGY	CONFEDERATES	IDEOLOGY
A	α	Moderate	4/1	Extreme Right/Extreme Left
B	β	Moderate	4/1	Extreme Left/Extreme Right
C	γ	Progressive	5	Extreme Left
D	δ	Conservative	5	Extreme Right

Table 3.1: Structure of the Focus Groups. Source: own elaboration.

- Focus group A: joined the average moderated subject in a dialogue with a majority (4 confederates) of influence leading to the extreme right, and a minority (1 confederate) with extreme left ideas.
- Focus group B: joined the moderate interested in politics subject in a dialogue with a majority (4 confederates) leading to the extreme left, and a minority (1 confederate) with extreme right ideas.
- Focus group C: joined the average progressive subject in a dialogue with just one ideology flow accurate to its ideas but more extreme.
- Focus group D: joined the conservative interested in politics subject in a dialogue with just one ideology flow accurate to its ideas but more extreme.

The first block (I) dealt with quite recurrent and controversial current issues where each political party represented in the Spanish parliament has taken a position in favor or against. Issues such as the trans law, the right to abortion, the management of illegal immigrants or the celebration of bullfights were discussed. This part of the study pretended to see how young people can change of opinion in about minutes when talking about certain intrinsic values. If there were noticeable changes, the vulnerability of the subject would be maximized with respect to possible manipulations in the echo chambers. On the other hand, if there were no changes, it would mean that the subject presents a parallel opinion to any speech.

The second block (II) was intended to find out the opinion of young people on the recent rise of extreme parties in Europe. Issues such as populism in Spain, whether Europe tends to return to the totalitarian situation of the last century, or whether Spain has forgotten its past were discussed. This block is useful to draw the trend in which young people see the future

of Europe, and more specifically Spain, really getting to understand if populist speeches are getting through the youth and if they really influence the representation of the political extremes in young votes.

Finally, in the third block (III) we can study controversial issues such as the banning of Donald Trump in different social networks, whether politicians contribute to the generation of "fake nws" for their benefit or if we need to be monitored the information we receive to verify that it is true will be treated. In this way we will see what mechanisms young people use to filter all this flow of information that reaches them daily, and how to contrast it to avoid falling into hoaxes.

During the focus groups, we will study different parameters of each subject.

| Discussion |

In focus group B, compared to focus group A there has been a higher level of debate during the session. This is because all the members of the group are interested on the political actuality and the data provided were more solid and professional than in the previous group. There was a greater diversity of opinions and this could be seen in the results. Although the subject had clearer criteria about the topics to be discussed and we consider that his average for information is 8.18, the second highest in the study, we can see that there is a slight tendency to the extreme.

In contrast to subject α, this subject did check information that he found shocking, such as a false piece of information provided by a colleague in which he stated that "there are more Moroccans than natives on two Canary Islands". He checked the information on *maldita.es*, one of the most important fact checking platforms in Spain, and in this way, he was able to refute the confederate's argument.

The most controversial topic of focus group B was whether there are populist political forces in Spain today, and apart from the obvious ones that we already expected such as Podemos and Vox, a very interesting topic has come to light: the last elections to the Community of Madrid on May 4th. It was mentioned the exceptional nature of this campaign due to the rapidity in which it has had to be developed, the increase of the popular vote and the variation in terms of parliamentary representation. They emphasize the return to the ideology of a non-partisan block, with a missing center and the tendency to polarization. They also say that what has stood out the most is the reunification of the right wing, mentioning Ayuso's victory as a product of a charismatic leadership with Trumpian overtones, avoiding issues that could have damaged her candidacy such as the management of the old people's homes, the level of job destruction or diverting the question of why the community of Madrid has not approved budgets for 2 years. Undoubtedly, they consider that the effectiveness of the campaigns has been based on a three-step strategy: to attract the attention of the citizen, to seek media repercussion and to reinforce the vote by calling the masses to vote.

It should be noted that, once again, the minority did not have as much influence over the subject even though their arguments were weighty. The majority has once again taken over the focus group, exerting an influence towards the extreme ideology on the subject of 21.57%, the lowest of all those we found in the study. We can conclude then that the subject has been influenced by the focus group, but as he was good informed and doubts sometimes about the reliability of information provided by the confederates, his vulnerability rate is much lower than a non-informed subject.

Subject γ was surprisingly involved in the focus group, although it is truth that his level of information was around the 5,36 over 10. However, its implication and enrollment were very noticeable compared to subject α , something that is very well shown in the results. His more comfortable position in the group made him participate debating the topics, but his greatest disadvantage was undoubtedly misinformation, as it made him more influenced by the other participants, thus making him the most vulnerable subject in the whole study with a tendency to the extreme of a 47,62%.

Although subject γ seems to control the topic related with misleading information, we haven't seen him contrast information during the whole session, believing some dangerous hoaxes created by his partners. This made him constantly position himself in favor of what someone else was proposing, and it was enough just to sound convincing and professional, in no case did he question the veracity of such information, as he felt that others were more specialized in the subject so they would be right.

As this focus group was composed by just one ideology flow, there were just a few different points of view all over the session. All topics were discussed in unanimity although the confederate's position was way more extreme than that of the subject. In spite of the high participation of the subject, we consider that his opinion was not shown 100%, leaning towards the majority position, although it must be admitted that during the focus group, he was more influenced by the mass than later in the personal poll.

Undoubtedly, the issue to be highlighted in focus group C has been the involvement of the state in the verification of information. They consider that it should be a must for everyone to have access to completely true information, since we live in a totally mediatized world, where information arrives in such large volumes that it is not possible to filter out only the truthful. However, they consider that this access to reliable information should be a right, and that currently there is no mechanism strong enough to achieve this. Their leftist position inclines them to trust the State to be able to create a filter that is responsible for the verification of information, but they soon understood thanks, to the opinion of the subject, that each government has its own interests that can be reflected in the type of information that reaches citizens, so we would be talking about manipulation of information, which would be extremely dangerous for society. In addition, he emphasizes that today there is no algorithm that verifies the reliability of the information, but it is a purely human work. The work of the fact-checker takes time, so the process would arrive very late, making the

communicative process ineffective and, it would be a form of censorship by other means, especially when applied from private companies that can censor the competition.

The work of the current fact-checkers was also questioned for a moment, as it is often impossible to be objective on certain issues and we tend to pretend to be right when it is not entirely fair. Then the code of principles of the international fact checking network was discussed, which establishes a code of non-partisanship on the part of the verifier. This allows us to have more confidence in the fact-checker's word, although it does not prevent us from continuing to doubt the full reliability of the information.

Finally, we are going to analyze the performance of the last subject. She was the subject that showed more information about the discussed topics compared with the rest of the focus groups of the study. However, this did not provide more variety of opinion in the dialogue; on the contrary, she gradually realized that her arguments were more extreme than she had originally considered, as the flow of right-wing information became greater and greater, fueling a sense of frustration and desire for change that was clearly perceptible in the results. It is worth mentioning that this is also the subject whose ideology was more defined, something that undoubtedly helped to tilt her position towards the extreme.

Despite having a 9.18 in knowledge about the topics, this subject also contrasted information during the focus group, but unlike subject β , she did not use it to verify information provided by others, but to support her own arguments. This is surprising, because it indicates that by agreeing with the ideas proposed by others, she encloses herself in that ideological bubble and tries to learn more about that same position in order to increase her conviction.

The most debated topic during the session was related to the rights of the LGBTBI+ community. As a general line of debate, it is considered that as they claim to be normal people, they should be treated as such and not pay special attention to them. They believe that the campaigns carried out by any type of collective nowadays are excessive and denote it as a call for attention and not a claim for rights. They have related it to the role of women in society, where they deny that the wage gap does not exist and that there is currently no discrimination against women. This topic could have been especially controversial if there had been other points of view with data that contradicted this flow of information, but since there was only one type of ideology, the arguments fed back to discuss more and more radical ideas. On the other hand, since no opinion was opposed to what was proposed, the flow of information could not be cut off.

As a result of the focus group, despite the fact that the subject δ experienced an extreme tendency of 33.33%, the second lowest of the study conducted, it should be noted that his final position is the most radical of the subjects studied. It should be considered that, as we have previously mentioned, she is also the subject with the most defined ideological position compared to the others, something that has had a notable influence on the results.

| Conclusions |

After having analyzed the general situation from the premise that populism and mediatization are the main factors that influence this construction of a politics of blocs rather than of parties, and after an intensive study and analysis of a group of young university students, we can reach several conclusions regarding the field of the study. The study should be repeated on a larger number of subjects in order to reach more accurate conclusions. Once this has been made clear, we will move on to answering and confirming the hypotheses to the questions previously asked.

Through this study, we have been able to verify the general attitude of dissatisfaction with the current political situation, specifically the Spanish case, on the part of young people. This situation can be perfectly seen on the subject δ , that in spite of arriving at the focus group with her political ideas quite clear, we could observe that as people of the same age and with similar studies presented her a more extreme proposal of her same ideology based on data of disagreement with the current Spanish situation, we realized that her position was gradually leaning towards a more defined and extreme position. Clearly, we have been able to verify that the vulnerability of the subjects who were more informed about the topics to be discussed and showed more interest in them was notably lower than the subjects who lacked sufficient information to define their own idea, tending to position themselves on the side of the majority and not questioning the arguments that seemed to be of weight on the part of the group. At this point, we can confirm H1.

In about an hour, all the subjects have changed their opinion in a more radical way for at least 2 out of the 15 topics of the poll. This is due to the fact that, in general, young people are influenced every day by an unlimited flow of information, where information is filtered by algorithms, and not by themselves. During the study, we have seen that most vulnerable people seem to position themselves with the ideas spread by the mass, although these ideas doesn't fit correctly with their profile, they want to feel part of the group, not to be the outcasts. Echo chambers work in the same way. As we have seen, even profiles with more defined ideas of their own can be victims of the popular discourse, confirming to a certain extent what was proposed in H2, since, as we have seen, the subject who contrasted the most information was the one who was least influenced by the group. However, polarization is not only an unconscious movement, it can also be defined as an intentional attitude. This is due to the existence of profiles with an initial tendency to consult related media and avoid opposing media, or profiles that, due to the risk of over-information, are forced to filter, creating echo chambers, totally isolated ideological niches.

Young people are accustomed to the culture of immediacy, so when obtaining any type of information, they will not spend much time checking its veracity, as we have seen, during the study we have only searched in cases where the hoax was quite obvious and was not camouflaged. In addition, there are situations where in order to use this information in our favor to justify our ideas, we do not bother to verify whether it is true or false, being in this

way, promoters of hoaxes and disinformation, because as we have already mentioned, sensationalism is what moves people and what sells the press and politicians through their campaigns. Therefore, in relation to H3, we must correct that although the contrast of information is a topic that concern young people, since we have seen that the line of debate has been very rich in opinions as they are surprisingly well informed about it, it is not a common practice, since it requires time and interest, something that most young people don't practice.

We can say that polarization is a fact of which young people are aware, but they are not condemning political attitudes, what they are looking for is a change, that is why the inclination towards extremes arises. This attitude of attrition due to the political panorama and the false promises of traditional leaders, gives rise to populist movements to provide the masses with a feeling of hope and belonging to the group, which is precisely what is achieved with the echo chambers, which are like black holes with great capacity for conviction and rapid uptake. The group pressure makes the influence greater and faster just by the feeling of belonging, very similar to the functioning of totalitarianisms. This situation can lead to past events, where real atrocities occurred thanks to the manipulation of the masses out of a need to belong to the group. We have verified, however, that the people with the greatest contrast of information and knowledge are the least vulnerable to this type of influences, so it is necessary to consider it essential to promote a type of education based on the contrast of information. Education is the basis, it is necessary to teach how to use basic tools so that anyone has the right to access to truthful information at any time. In this way, we would prevent sensationalism, which is what generates fear in public opinion, from going to the background and achieving the transmission of quality information by the media, politicians and society itself, all responsible for dissemination of all the information flows.

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| Appendix |

Table 3.2: General view of the whole process results.

TOPIC	BEFORE FOCUS GROUP				DURING FOCUS GROUP				AFTER FOCUS GROUP			
	α	β	γ	δ	α	β	γ	δ	α	β	γ	δ
Homosexual marriages	1	2	2	1	-	-	-	-	1	2	2	1
Transgender law	0	0	1	2	2	0	2	2	2	0	2	2
Life decision	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2
Abortion	1	0	1	1	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
Death penalty	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	1
Bullfighting	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2
Economic aids	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	2	0	0	1
Wealth redistribution	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	2
Illegal immigrants	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2
Equality vs economic growth	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	2	0
Elites elimination	0	0	1	2	2	-	2	2	2	1	2	2
Information monitoring	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	2
Constitution reform	0	0	1	2	-	-	-	-	0	0	1	2
Catalonia referendum	1	1	0	2	-	-	-	-	1	1	0	2
Historical memory	0	0	0	1	-	-	-	2	0	0	1	2
\bar{x}	0 , 4 0	0 , 4 7	0 , 7 4	1 , 4 1	1 , 1 8	0 , 8 0	1 , 3 6	1 , 5 8	1 , 1 3	0 , 8 0	1 , 3 4	1 , 6 1

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3.3: Subject a results.

TOPIC	BEFORE FOCUS GROUP	DURING FOCUS GROUP	AFTER FOCUS GROUP	GENERAL KNOWLEDGE DURING FOCUS GROUP
Homosexual marriages	1	-	1	-
Transgender law	0	2	2	3
Life decision	0	1	1	6
Abortion	1	2	1	7
Death penalty	0	0	0	3
Bullfigthing	0	1	2	7
Economic aids	0	2	2	1
Wealth redistribution	1	0	1	4
Illegal immigrants	1	1	1	2
Equality vs economic growth	0	0	1	3
Elites elimination	0	2	2	2
Information monitoring	1	2	2	8
Constitution reform	0	-	0	-
Catalonia referendum	1	-	1	-
Historical memory	0	-	0	-
\bar{x}	0,40 (0-2)	1,18 (0-2)	1,13 (0-2)	4,18 (1-10)

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3.4: Subject β results.

TOPIC	BEFORE FOCUS GROUP	DURING FOCUS GROUP	AFTER FOCUS GROUP	GENERAL KNOWLEDGE DURING FOCUS GROUP
Homosexual marriages	2	-	2	-
Transgender law	0	0	0	8
Life decision	0	2	2	6
Abortion	0	0	0	7
Death penalty	0	0	0	9
Bullfigthing	0	1	1	7
Economic aids	0	0	0	10
Wealth redistribution	1	1	1	10
Illegal immigrants	1	2	1	8
Equality vs economic growth	0	0	1	9
Elites elimination	0	-	1	7
Information monitoring	2	2	2	9
Constitution reform	0	-	0	-
Catalonia referendum	1	-	1	-
Historical memory	0	-	0	-
\bar{x}	0,47 (0-2)	0,80 (0-2)	0,80 (0-2)	8,18 (1-10)

Source: own elaboration

Table 3.5: Subject γ results.

TOPIC	BEFORE FOCUS GROUP	DURING FOCUS GROUP	AFTER FOCUS GROUP	GENERAL KNOWLEDGE DURING FOCUS GROUP
Homosexual marriages	2	-	2	-
Transgender law	1	2	2	6
Life decision	0	1	2	3
Abortion	1	1	1	6
Death penalty	1	2	2	5
Bullfigthing	1	2	2	7
Economic aids	0	1	0	3
Wealth redistribution	0	0	0	5
Illegal immigrants	1	2	2	4
Equality vs economic growth	1	1	2	6
Elites elimination	1	2	2	6
Information monitoring	1	1	1	8
Constitution reform	1	-	1	-
Catalonia referendum	0	-	0	-
Historical memory	0	-	1	-
\bar{x}	0,74 (0-2)	1,36 (0-2)	1,34 (0-2)	5,36 (1-10)

Source: own elaboration

Table 3.6: Subject δ results.

		δ		
TOPIC	BEFORE FOCUS GROUP	DURING FOCUS GROUP	AFTER FOCUS GROUP	GENERAL KNOWLEDGE DURING FOCUS GROUP
Homosexual marriages	1	-	1	-
Transgender law	2	2	2	9
Life decision	1	1	2	8
Abortion	1	1	1	8
Death penalty	1	1	1	9
Bullfigthing	2	2	2	9
Economic aids	1	2	1	10
Wealth redistribution	2	2	2	10
Illegal immigrants	2	2	2	10
Equality vs economic growth	0	0	0	10
Elites elimination	2	2	2	10
Information monitoring	2	2	2	8
Constitution reform	2	-	2	-
Catalonia referendum	2	-	2	-
Historical memory	1	2	2	-
\bar{x}	1,4 (0-2)	1,58 (0-2)	1,6 (0-2)	9,18 (1-10)

Source: own elaboration.

| Biographical notes |

Manuel Carmona Rodríguez is a Hired Doctor and Assistant Doctor accredited by Spanish ANECA. Professor of Journalistic Writing and Public Opinion in the Degree of Journalism and in the Double Degree of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication of the URJC, he also directs TFG. At this university he has taught courses on Principles of Communication in Spanish and English in the Degree of Protocol, Event Organization and

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He has been an Erasmus professor at Kadir Has University in Istanbul and at ISCOM in Paris during the 2020-21 academic year. And he is a writer of essays and novels in Spanish and English, highlighting among others, the novel Love again (Total Recall Press, 2016) or the essay Ortega y Marías la filosofía del siglo XXI (Dykinson, 2020).

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During her Erasmus at Erfurt Universität, in Germany, she had the opportunity to explore more in deep the dynamics of nowadays political sphere, analyzing the effects of mediatization and populist rhetoric in the public scenario thanks to Dr. Carmona Rodríguez, who supported her since the beginning of her studies on the field.

She is currently living in Germany, working as SEO and Content Manager at a startup based in Berlin, while she is finishing her second bachelor's degree in Digital Design. Her greatest aspiration is to continue learning and be part of the political campaign team in the communication office of European institutions.