ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

Television and Political Polarisation in Spain and Andalusia. The Case of the 23 July General Election

Televisión y polarización política en España y Andalucía. El caso de las elecciones generales del 23-J

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ABSTRACT

Political polarisation has become, in recent times, one of the hottest topics within political science. However, there are still very few studies that address the phenomenon as applied to television and from a regional perspective. For that reason, the aim here is to compare political polarisation by television channel and political party, from an Andalusian perspective. The newscasts of five channels were recorded during the 23 July election campaign in Spain. We operationalised polarisation as an affective distance, calculated through sentiment analysis, and used ANOVA models to compare mean polarisation by channel and party. The results show more polarised media coverage of Vox and Sumar than that of PP and PSOE, although with some variation depending on the channel. We also found that the media coverage of the Andalusian regional channel presents more positive sentiments than the national channels.

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RESUMEN

La polarización política es, en los últimos tiempos, uno de los grandes hot topics de la ciencia política. Sin embargo, aún son escasos los estudios que la abordan desde la televisión y con perspectiva regional. Por este motivo, se plantea como objetivo comparar la polarización política por cadena de televisión y por partido político, incorporando la perspectiva andaluza. Se capturaron los informativos de cinco cadenas durante la campaña de las elecciones del 23-J en España. Operacionalizamos la polarización como distancia afectiva, calculada mediante sentiment analysis, y estimamos modelos ANOVA para comparar las medias de polarización por cadenas y partidos. Los resultados muestran una cobertura mediática de Vox y Sumar más polarizada que la de PP y PSOE, aunque con variaciones por cadenas. También encontramos que la cobertura mediática de la cadena regional andaluza presenta sentimientos más positivos que las cadenas nacionales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: polarizacion; elecciones generales; campañas electorales; partidos políticos; medios de comunicación; Andalucía.

1. Introduction

The concept of political polarisation bears a highly negative connotation, as it contributes to the centralisation of power (Lee, 2015), legislative stagnation (Jones, 2001) and high levels of hostility. In both Spain and Andalusia, the high levels of polarisation detected have been attributed to factors such as the emergence of populist groupings and discourses, the substantial transformation of the party system (with greater levels of fragmentation and ideological distancing), territorial tensions, or the recent COVID-19 crisis (Barreda, 2021; Torcal and Comelles, 2020). At the same time, previous studies show that certain issues, such as immigration and taxation, are more sensitive to polarisation (Miller, 2021).

The media is a space for political confrontation and provides frameworks for interpreting democracy and its effects (Cazorla *et al.*, 2022). Media outlets act as intensifiers and emitters of emotions that the population processes and takes into account when deciding their electoral behaviour, providing news programmes or journalists with sufficient social authority to reproduce specific ideologies and social positions (Ericson *et al.*, 1987). Specifically, through an intentional strategy involving *priming* and *framing*, media outlets encourage the public to accept certain ways of categorising reality as natural and obvious (Hall *et al.*, 1978) and represent a crucial framework for the development of collective emotions (Rivera *et al.*, 2021). Due to this role in generating public opinion, media outlets are perceived as the main polarising agents (Masip *et al.*, 2020).

We know that polarisation is related to the particular characteristics of each media company (Waisbord, 2020). Recent studies hold some conservative media outlets responsible for viral coverage of far-right activities in several countries, thereby increasing viewer extremism, whether for or against. The Fox News channel in the

United States (Peck, 2019) and similar media outlets in Eastern Europe, both public and controlled by their populist leaders (Szabó *et al.*, 2019), are examples of the relationship between media outlets, parties and political polarisation.

This ideologically biased media coverage reaches its full splendour when elections are called. For this reason, the electoral campaign period is the most suitable for the study and measurement of political polarisation (Hernández *et al.*, 2021). Even if the limits of their duration seem to be blurring (Blumenthal, 1980), we must not disregard the crucial relevance of "real" electoral campaigns in the process of electing representatives. It is during an electoral campaign that greater effort and resources are invested in mobilising the electorate (ACE, 2024), greater political content floods the media outlets and the discursive proximity or distance of parties and candidates can be better assessed (Caramelo-Pérez, 2020).

This led to thoughts about the levels of polarisation on television during the electoral campaign in Spain and Andalusia, involving a comparison of channels with respect to their treatment of political parties. This implies asking which parties suffer from more polarised television coverage during the election campaign and whether there are differences depending on the channel. As a hypothesis, we propose that Vox and Sumar, at the extremes of the ideological spectrum, show greater polarisation regarding their coverage than the traditional parties (H1). In turn, we expect to find differences in the levels of polarisation in the coverage of each party based on the television channel (H2).

While there are relatively many studies on the relationship between political polarisation and the media outlet system, there remain few that address this issue within a regional context. This research thus aims to provide a comparative view of polarisation in Spain and Andalusia, focusing on the electoral campaign for the general elections of 23 July 2023 (7 to 21 July). This research seeks to achieve the general aim of measuring the political polarisation generated by the main Spanish and Andalusian television channels during their coverage of the activities of political parties during the latest electoral campaign.

This intention is broken down into the specific objectives of:

1. Identifying if there are differences by channel in their levels of polarisation.

2. Recognising which parties have more polarised media coverage.

3. Comparing the polarisation levels per party on each of the channels.

2. Political polarisation in the media coverage of campaigns

2.1. Political polarisation

Political polarisation refers to the generation of extreme political positions that lead to growing hostility between different factions (Layman *et al.*, 2006) and a lack of consensus (Mutz, 2006). The various options that represent the interests of the governed move apart in such a way that their beliefs or opinions are irreconcilable and the legislative task becomes unsustainable, resulting in a truly fragmented political landscape. This fragmentation is not restricted to parliamentary institutions, unable to find points of consensus. It also refers to public opinion on political-social issues, in which citizens are grouped in diametrically opposed positions on the ideological spectrum (Phillips, 2022). Through this, polarisation leads to the strengthening of the poles of the political spectrum and the separation of the ideological centre (Corrales, 2005).

Binder (2015) sees in political polarisation a real obstacle to the common development of democratic society, since the lack of cooperation and consensus between the government and the opposition, and within society in general, makes decision-making difficult and less representative. The 3rd National Survey of Affective Polarisation conducted by CEMOP (2023) shows that those interviewed demonstrating high levels of emotional polarisation tend to favour the reversal of certain democratic norms more than those less polarised. In most cases, respondents consider it preferable to have strong leaders who make firm decisions, even if this involves altering the usual democratic processes (Melero *et al.*, 2023). However, according to Wagner (2021), certain levels of polarisation also lead to increased levels of political and electoral participation and greater political culturalisation.

The origin of this polarisation is controversial. Some authors point to structural factors, such as the electoral system, radical right-wing populist ideologies[1] and partisan dynamics (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), while others focus on factors linked to the activities of the media outlets (Sunstein, 2009).

2.2. Media polarisation

Media polarisation can be interpreted as ideologically biased and divergent media outlet coverage (Fletcher and Jenkins, 2019). Authors such as Prior (2013) assert that media outlets do not have polarising effects on consumers, since in exercising their freedom of information they choose the media outlets they wish to consume. In contrast, it is argued that media outlets such as television have increased polarisation, since, by enabling individuals to select channels that fit their pre-existing ideology, the media outlet acts as an echo chamber (Bishop, 2008; Sunstein, 2009).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) define the Spanish media system as polarised pluralist, insofar as the net of media outlets and party interests in Spain is frequently inter-twined. According to the authors, this confusion of interests is due to the fact that the journalistic profession is scarcely professionalised and that the state intervenes to a high degree in the configuration of the media system through licenses and the imposition of editorial guidelines. González (2008) considers that parties in Spain are highly linked to the press, leading to the phenomenon of parallelism between media outlets and politics (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

In addition, Manin's (1998) classic conceptualisation places Spain at an intermediate point between the models of party democracy and audience democracy, due to the close link between journalistic practice and the conflicting partisan interests of the media outlets. It seems that *non-partisanship is not a goal for the media outlets, but quite the opposite* (Castromil and Chavero, 2012).

Putting this in perspective, the Pew Research Center (2018) describes the Span-ish transition from a relatively stable and non-polarised political climate to an antagonistic scenario of constant polarisation, largely due to the increase in the use of social media and the evolution towards the warmongering language used by most traditional communication channels (Berrocal-Gonzalo *et al.*, 2023). Both situations mean that, according to CEMOP measurements (Crespo, 2023), affective polarisation in Spain has increased from 3.98 points (out of 10) in 2021 to 4.56 in 2023.

This increase in the political polarisation of Spanish society, resulting from the me-diatisation of news channels (Orriols, 2021), is also favoured by the overexposure, directly or indirectly, of citizens to certain political content and television channels and by the way in which they approach their audiences.

An essential element in the study of political polarisation promoted by the media outlets is audience segmentation (Napoli, 2021). Fragmentation is the process of dividing an audience into smaller groups that have similar characteristics, such as political beliefs or age, among others (Napoli, 2021). As a result of the de-velopment of new communication channels and the personalisation of content, new tools have emerged to attract viewers. The "filter bubbles", responsible for showing the user content in line with their beliefs in order to create a climate of security (Pariser, 2011), lead to "echo chambers", where similar opinions are reinforced and divergent perspectives are excluded (Flaxman *et al.*, 2016), thus reinforcing pre-existing values without leaving room for reflection and a con-trast of ideas. However, this process is not unrelated to individual action. Citi-zens know the leanings of each information channel and its position on matters of interest (Rodríguez and Castromil, 2010), so it is very difficult to determine what happens first: an *agenda setting* and a biased *framing/priming* or the citi-zen's predisposition to receive self-reinforcing *inputs* based on their own point of view. A kind of paradox is thus constructed, since citizens consider the media

system as biased and with leanings, but at the same time they are reluctant to turn to information channels with editorial lines which differ from their own value systems, thus imposing selective exposure.

Within the Andalusian context, the Audiovisual Barometer of Andalusia (CAA, 2022) includes an assessment of the population in the territory on the scale (0 = none and 10 = a lot) of information impartiality and political pluralism within the media outlets. Its results are not very encouraging: none of the media outlets (television, radio and the Internet) receives the approval of the Andalusian population, with the Internet achieving the best result (4.9), followed by radio (4.2), with television rounding out the classification, with an average of 3.9. Some 52% of the Andalusian population believes that television is not impartial. In general, the majority of respondents consider that the audiovisual media outlets analysed (television, radio and the Internet) lack impartiality.

Despite this mistrust and the progressive increase in those who receive their information via social media, television is still the predominant option among Spaniards for finding out about political news, being selected by 76% of them, compared to 35% who select *online* platforms, according to the Eurobarometer Media & News Survey (2022). This *telecracy* (Sartori, 1999) alludes to the fact that television conditions the electoral process, whether through the elevation or marginalisation of candidates, in the discourse selected to report on the campaign, or in the positioning of each news item within the newscast. In addition, it is in television where there is a greater ideological load in the coverage of the campaigns (Horwitz, 2007; McChesney, 1999), a more negative treatment of the news (Dunaway, 2013) and greater efforts to connect with the viewer through the reinforcement of pre-existing attitudes and beliefs (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Iyengar *et al.*, 2012).

2.3. Polarisation, television and electoral campaigns

This binomial between parties and the media outlets has its maximum expression when elections are called. It is during the electoral campaigns when media efforts in the coverage of partisan events are seen to a greater extent. Some common dynamics in the media treatment of campaigns are an increase in personalisation, a gradual growth of negativism and a trend towards increasingly[2] interpretive coverage focused on a competition format similar to that of a horse race (Luengo, 2011; Reinemann and Wilke, 2007). All of the above leads to the provision of a political-ideological perspective to the detriment of others (Entman, 1993).

One of the main difficulties in conceptualising campaigns is their limited duration. Since its popularisation by Blumenthal (1980), the idea of the permanent campaign seems to be globally accepted: that which is subject to the strenuous logic of the majority on a daily basis and in which the obsession to publicise party achievements (or vices) far exceeds the electoral campaign.

Another relevant aspect to analyse in relation to the electoral campaign is the theory of the minimum effects of campaigns, through which voters reinforce their preferences and their pre-existing disagreements with the various parties. In addition, there is the theory of the social identity of polarisation between internal and external groups, which suggests that, in media contexts involving negative coverage, the extremisation of positions is further accentuated (Hansen and Kosiara-Persen, 2017). Political polarisation, in this sense, is reinforced by providing partial information, accentuating ideology in the news narrative and affecting the perception and decisions of voters by adopting more extremist positions (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010). The fragmentation of audiences linked to sensationalism and media bias is a factor that affects the quality of public debate and democratic decision-making (Mutz, 2006). In short, the relationship between the media and political polarisation during electoral campaigns seems more than direct.

3. Methodology

The data used for the analysis come from the second-edition newscasts of the television channels with the largest audience at the national level (TVE, Antena 3, Telecinco and La Sexta), together with Canal Sur, in order to provide data at the Andalusian level, during the period of the electoral campaign (7 to 21 July) of the general elections held on 23 July 2023 in Spain. The collected material was labelled and broken down by news item, thus obtaining the individualised unit of analysis.

The video was transcribed into text using Whisper open source software, a machine learning model for speech recognition and transcription. All campaign news mentioning any of the four main parties, according to parliamentary representation in the 2023 general elections (PSOE, PP, Vox and Sumar), or their national or regional leaders, were noted.

Next, we performed a *sentiment analysis*, a text analysis technique framed in natural language processing (NLP)[3]. It is an automatic technique based on algorithms, and has been validated by previous studies that cite it as suitable for the analysis of large amounts of text (Serrano-Contreras *et al.*, 2020, 2021; Luengo *et al.*, 2021). The tool used *was* sentimentr (Rinker, 2022), which, compared to other sentiment analysis software, has the advantage of taking into account the context when estimating polarity by considering *valence shifters* (Rinker, 2022). An example of how it works can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Example of how sentiment analysis works with "sentimentr"

						Sentiment
1	The 0	economy 0	is going 0	well 2		1.00
2	The 0	economy 0	is going 0	badly -2		-1.00
3	The 0	economy 0	is not going (-)	0	well 2	-0.89
4	The 0	economy 0	is going 0	very >	well 2	1.61
5	The 0	economy 0	is going 0	quite <	well 2	0.18
	(–) *Negator:* Reverses polarity.					
	(>) *Amplifier*: Increases the impact of the PW.					
	(<) *Deamplifier:* Reduces the impact of the PW.					
	PW: polarised word.					

Source: own research based on Rinker (2022).

In all the examples in Table 1, "well" and "badly" are the words that contain the polarity (*polarised word*). But in examples 3, 4 and 5, the *polarised word* is accompanied by a *valence shifter*: a negator (3), an amplifier (4) and a deamplifier (5). Table 1 shows how the polarity of the sentence is modified depending on the presence of these modifiers. A more detailed explanation can be found in Rinker (2022).

After calculating the sentiment value at the phrase level, we add the phrases to the story mentioning the party—or one of its leaders—and calculate the mean sentiment. Thus, each news item can have different sentiment values for each party, since the mean is calculated by adding the news items that mention the various parties. In total, we have 377 unique news stories and 673 news snippets mentioning any of the parties (Table 2).

Table 2
Summary of the news captured by party and media outlet and descriptive of sentiment

	N news stories*	News stories by day	N news snippets**	Sentiment		
				Mean	SD	Median
Total	377	22.18	673	-0.08	0.28	-0.08
Channel						
Antena 3	109	7.27	200	-0.08	0.26	-0.08
Canal Sur	47	2.76	68	0.04	0.35	-0.04
La Sexta	80	4.71	147	-0.08	0.27	-0.07
TVE	79	4.65	141	-0.10	0.24	-0.09
Telecinco	62	3.65	117	-0.15	0.29	-0.09
Party						
PSOE	260	15.29	260	0.05	0.47	0.09
PP	268	15.76	268	0.01	0.40	0.03
Vox	173	10.18	173	0.02	0.47	-0.02
Sumar	86	5.06	86	0.12	0.77	0.14

* News stories: total news stories mentioning any of the parties.

** News snippets: news snippets mentioning each party.

Source: own research.

We understand media polarisation as affective distance. For its operationalisation, we followed the methodology proposed by Serrano-Contreras *et al.* (2020, 2021), taking the degree of polarisation in a news item as *the absolute value of the distance between the value of the sentiment of that news item and the median sentiment of all news items*:

$$P_{ij} = \left| S_{ij} - Me \right|,$$

where P_{ij} is the polarisation level of the news item *i* for party *j*, S_{ij} is the sentiment value of the news item *i* for party *j*, and Me is the median of the sentiment value over the total news item. S_{ij} takes values between –1 (Most Negative Sentiment) and +1 (Most Positive Sentiment) according to the sentiment value of each news item. P_{ij} takes values between 0 (absence of polarisation) and +200 (maximum polarisation). takes values between 0 (absence of polarisation) and +200 (maximum polarisation).

Using this scale, we will compare the levels of polarisation in the media coverage of the election campaign by channel and party using one- and two-factor ANOVA models. The ANOVA models allow us to contrast the null hypothesis of media equality using a metric dependent variable (polarisation) between the various groups of one or more explanatory variables or factors (parties, channels). Through *post-hoc* testing, we will perform pairwise comparisons to identify which groups differ from each other, using Tamhane's T2 statistic for heterogeneous variances.

4. Results: polarisation in media coverage of the main parties

Below are the results of the analysis of polarisation by party and television channel during the 2023 general election campaign. The descriptive statistics of the polarisation measurement, as well as the sentiment values on which it is calculated, can be found in Annex 1.

4.1. Polarisation by channel

Analysis of polarisation by channel shows no significant differences in levels of affective polarisation. Only Canal Sur obtains polarisation levels that seem to be significantly higher than the rest of the channels (Figure 1), although these differences are not statistically significant (Table 3). Subsequent analyses show that this apparent—albeit not significant—greater polarisation of Canal Sur could be attributed to 25% higher news (upper quartile of sentiment) with a much more positive sentiment value than we find with the rest of the channels: the national channels place their 75th percentile of sentiment at around 0.01, while this value in the sentiment distribution for Canal Sur stands at 0.22 (Annex 1, Table 2). Telecinco, despite having a level of polarisation close to the mean, also has very polarising news in its coverage of the parties during the campaign, especially from the 90th percentile onward (Annex 1, Table 1), which, unlike Canal Sur, would be attributable to 10% of news with very negative sentiment (–0.59 in p10 of sentiment, compared to –0.38 around which the rest of the channels oscillate) (Annex 1, Table 2).

Figure 1

Polarisation means by channel
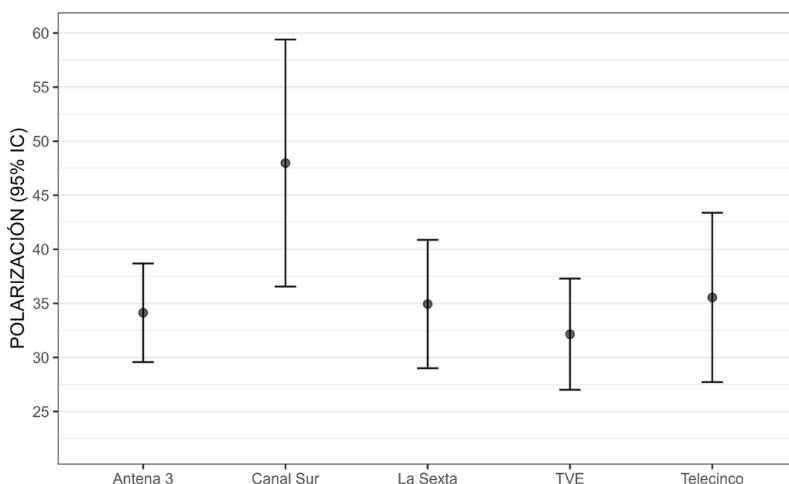
Source: own research.

Table 3

Comparison of means of polarisation levels of Canal Sur and national channels during the 2023 general election campaign

Multiple comparisons (Tamhane's T2)						
Dependent variable: POLARISATION						
(I) Media outlet	(J) Media outlet	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
Canal Sur	Antena 3	13.841	6.277	0.263	-4.176	31.859
	La Sexta	13.039	6.569	0.400	-5.749	31.827
	TVE	15.827	6.392	0.141	-2.494	34.148
	Telecinco	12.431	7.067	0.570	-7.700	32.561

The Mean Difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: own research.

4.2. Polarisation by party

By party, we find considerable differences between the bipartisan bloc (PP and PSOE) and the most recent groupings (Vox and Sumar). Vox and Sumar showed greater polarisation in their media coverage during the campaign period (Figure 2). The comparison of ANOVA means shows marginally significant differences ($p < 0.1$) in the polarisation levels of Vox coverage with respect to PP ($p = 0.07$) and Sumar with PP ($p = 0.06$), although the 95% confidence intervals, with the upper limit very close to 0, show an indication of the greater polarisation in the media coverage of Sumar and Vox (Table 4).

Sumar is the party with the highest mean polarisation (45.3) and also with the highest variability in polarisation levels in its media coverage (SD = 44.6) (Annex 2, Table 1). It is followed by Vox, with a high polarisation (40.3) in its coverage, although with lower variability (SD = 38.2). When we look at the distribution of the news that mentions each party by level of polarisation, we see, at the upper end of the distribution, that the most polarising news stories about Vox and Sumar are much higher than those that mention PP or PSOE. This occurs from the median (located around 30 points for Sumar and Vox, compared to 22 points for PSOE and 17 points for PP), and particularly from the 75th percentile onward (66 points for Sumar and 53 points for Vox, compared to 44 points for PSOE and 42 points for PP) (Annex 2, Table 1).

Sentiment distributions help us identify where the sentiment expressed in the media coverage of each party lies farther from the median. We see that these polarisation values could be attributed to the presence of more negative sentiments in the coverage of Vox and Sumar, with sentiment means of -0.15 and -0.11, respectively, compared to -0.05 for PSOE and PP.

The position of the first quartile of sentiment of the Sumar and Vox coverage (–0.29 for both) also lies further from the first quartile of PSOE (–0.22) and PP (–0.17), and more clearly in the first decile (–0.50 for Sumar and Vox, and –0.31 for PSOE and PP). This lower sentiment value in Vox's coverage is maintained throughout the distribution (Annex 2, Table 2), indicating that its levels of polarisation would be attributable to the presence of more negative sentiments in its media coverage.

Figure 2

Polarisation means by party
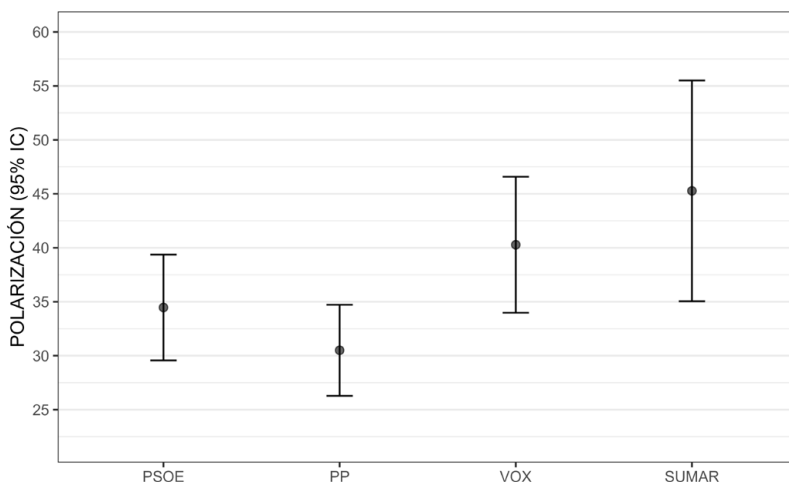
Source: own research.

We also found greater variability in the levels of sentiment in the media coverage of Vox and Sumar, especially in the case of Sumar (SD-Vox = 0.29; SD-Sumar = 0.34), a party that stands out through its news coverage with more negative sentiments (p10), but also at the opposite end of the distribution, in its news coverage with more positive sentiments (p90-Sumar = 0.32; p90-Total = 0.24) (Annex 2, Table 2). Therefore, the tendency of Vox and Sumar to present more negative sentiment values in their media coverage than PP and PSOE is only partially reversed from the 90th percentile, where Sumar becomes the party with the highest sentiment value among the 10% of most positive news, followed by PSOE, and at a distance from PP and Vox, which reach less favourable values at the upper end of their sentiment distributions.

Table 4

Comparison of means of polarisation levels in media coverage by party during the 2023 general election campaign

(I) Party	(J) Party	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
PP	PSOE	-3.966	3.300	0.792	-12.689	4.757
	Sumar	-14.773	5.647	0.060	-29.937	0.392
	Vox	-9.777	3.869	0.070	-20.030	0.476
PSOE	PP	3.966	3.300	0.792	-4.757	12.689
	Sumar	-10.807	5.789	0.330	-26.324	4.710
	Vox	-5.811	4.073	0.635	-16.597	4.974
Sumar	PP	14.773	5.647	0.060	-0.392	29.937
	PSOE	10.807	5.789	0.330	-4.710	26.324
	Vox	4.996	6.131	0.961	-11.387	21.379
Vox	PP	9.777	3.869	0.070	-0.476	20.030
	PSOE	5.811	4.073	0.635	-4.974	16.597
	Sumar	-4.996	6.131	0.961	-21.379	11.387

Multiple comparisons (Tamhane's T2)
Dependent variable: POLARISATION

The Mean Difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: own research.

4.3. Polarisation by channel and party

The comparison of the coverage of each party by channel shows some differences in their levels of polarisation, particularly between the two parties with the greatest polarisation in their media coverage (Figure 3). Vox is the party that presents the most polarisation on La Sexta, while Sumar receives more polarised coverage on Antena 3 and Telecinco, where Vox also experiences more polarisation in its coverage than the bipartisan parties, but to a lesser extent than Sumar. The polarisation levels of Sumar and Vox coverage do not seem to differ from those of PSOE and PP coverage on La Sexta and TVE.

We used a two-way ANOVA model to demonstrate the existence of these differences. When we simultaneously consider the polarisation means by channel and party, we find significant differences ($p < 0.05$) both between channels and between parties (Table 5). The pairwise comparisons (Annex 3, Table 1) allow us to confirm most of the differences that we observed in Figure 3. On Antena 3, Sumar suffers significantly more polarised coverage than PP and PSOE ($p < 0.05$), and Vox obtains greater polarisation in its coverage than PP, although this is only marginally significant ($p < 0.1$). On Telecinco, Sumar also experiences significantly more polarised media coverage than PP and PSOE ($p < 0.05$), while we cannot affirm that the level of polarisation in Vox's coverage is higher than that of other parties on the same channel. On La Sexta,

on the other hand, Vox receives significantly more polarised coverage (p < 0.05) than PP, while on this channel the treatment of Sumar does not differ significantly in its mean polarisation from the rest of the parties.

On Canal Sur, although there is a high mean value in polarisation in the coverage of Sumar, its low N, appreciable in its broader confidence interval, does not allow us to compare it with other parties on this channel. We found no significant differences between the rest of the parties on Canal Sur. On TVE, we also did not find statistically significant differences in party polarisation means.

In short, the three private broadcasters (Telecinco, Antena 3 and La Sexta) have significant differences in the polarisation means between parties—specifically, between Vox and Sumar on the one hand, and PP and PSOE on the other—while we cannot confirm the existence of these differences for the public broadcasters.

The distribution by polarisation levels of the news mentioning each party on each channel is suitable for comparing means (Annex 4, Table 1). On Antena 3, Sumar's coverage has 25% (p75 = 74.7) and, above all, 10% (p90 = 145.8) of highly polarising news. On Telecinco, the greatest polarisation in the coverage of Sumar—compared to traditional parties—occurs throughout the distribution, with polarisation values already higher than the rest of the parties by the first decile (p10 = 7.8), and until the last decile, where Vox becomes the party that has the 10% most polarising news in its coverage (p90–Sumar = 125.9; p90–Vox = 144.1).

Figure 3
Polarisation by party and channel
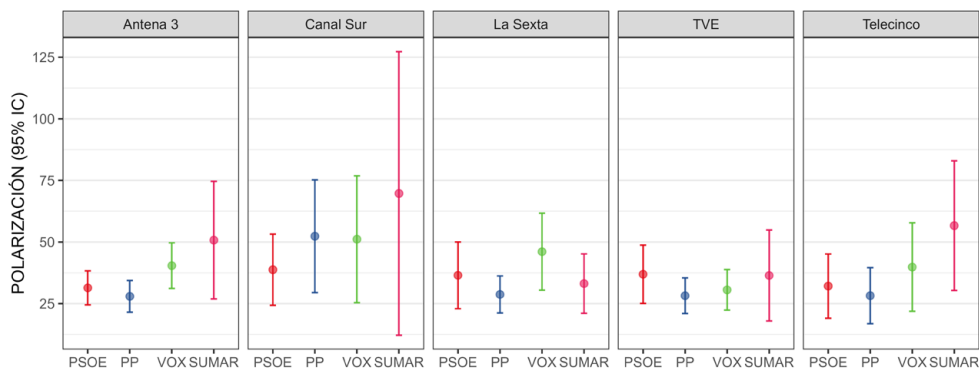
Source: own research.

Table 5

Two-way ANOVA polarisation by party and channel

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent variable: POLARISATION

Origin	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial eta squared	Non-centrality parameter	Observed power[b]
Corrected model	44,981.272	19	2,367.435	1.742	0.026	0.048	33.096	0.965
Intersection	709,789.387	1	709,789.387	522.246	0.000	0.444	522.246	1.000
Party	15,056.491	3	5,018.830	3.693	0.012	0.017	11.078	0.804
Channel	13,495.849	4	3,373.962	2.482	0.043	0.015	9.930	0.709
Party*Channel	15,372.112	12	1,281.009	0.943	0.503	0.017	11.310	0.560
Error	887,498.622	653	1,359.110					
Total	1,782,338.249	673						
Corrected total	932,479.894	672						

[b] Calculated using alpha = 0.05.

Source: own research.

On Antena 3 and Telecinco, both Sumar and Voxamass10% (p10) of news with very negative levels of sentiment compared to traditional parties (Annex 4, Table 2). Vox maintains this lower sentiment value in its coverage throughout the distribution on both channels. In the case of Sumar, Antena 3 shows news with more positive sentiment values than for the rest of the matches from the 75th percentile, and particularly from the 90th percentile, although the tendency, as on Telecinco, is to present more negative sentiments in most of the distribution. On La Sexta, Vox is the party with the most negative mean levels of sentiment in its coverage (-0.16), with lower sentiment values than the rest of the parties in 75% of news. The possible factors involved in these trends will be discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion and conclusion

At a time when research on polarisation is increasingly focused on *online* debate (Waisbord, 2020), our results show the role that television continues to play in polarisation during electoral campaigns.

In the relationship between television channels and political polarisation, as indicated at the beginning of this article, the mediation of the main adjectives of contemporary political coverage is fundamental: infotainment, sensationalism and personalism (Maier and Nai, 2020). On the regional channels, these phenomena are also recognisable. However, our results point to indications of less conflict than in state media outlets. A comparative study between the political coverage of regional channels in Germany and the United States (Ellger *et al.*, 2021) links the decreasing presence (and therefore voter exposure) of local news with the increase in negative

political polarisation in multi-party systems. Its main contribution lies in verifying that the percentage of the vote that goes to small parties, which tend to maintain positions further away from the ideological centre, increases after the reduction in the *share* of local news. In addition, the authors identify a strong correlation between voting for centrist parties and the consumption of local news (Ellger *et al.*, 2021). Delving deeper into the above, Darr *et al.* (2018) state that local news reports are related to a more consensual approach to politics, while the national media outlets are more ideological.

Next, and regardless of its geographical scope, we wondered if the political ideology of each television channel is somehow linked to the polarisation of its news. To categorise television channels according to the left-right axis, we follow the proposal of Ramírez-Dueñas and Humanes (2023), who build a three-point scale for each media outlet based on the position of its followers on the ideological self-positioning scale reported to the CIS. The resulting axis includes the scores of -1 = progressive, 0 = neutral and 1 = conservative. Thus, RTVE and Telecinco are considered neutral (value 0), Antena 3 conservative (1) and La Sexta progressive (-1). Once the media outlets have been categorised, we must recognise that with regards to Spain, sufficient scientific evidence has not been found that correlates a conservative worldview of the specific media outlet with greater political polarisation. In fact, for the campaign analysed, it is a channel categorised as ideologically neutral (Telecinco) in which we noted more negative sentiments in its treatment of political news.

However, there is extensive literature reinforcing the relationship between polarisation and conservatism in the United States. Authors such as DiMaggio (2019), Garrett *et al.* (2019) and Chalif (2011) have shown that, systematically, the Fox News channel provides news from the perspective of extremism. As a direct consequence of this polarisation away from conservatism, Chalif (2011) denounces the oversizing of echo chambers, in which the more polarised the coverage, the greater the demand for self-referential news by the viewer/voter. In addition, the use of various media outlets as a source of news has also been linked to polarisation, with conservatives more likely to use traditional media outlets and liberals more likely to use social media (Hawdon *et al.*, 2020). In Eastern European countries, according to Szabó *et al.* (2019), an even more perverse relationship occurs, as it is the ultraconservative populist leaders themselves who dominate television channels, which they use for their own personal exaltation and to insult their enemies.

Now that we have recognised the profile of polarisation in state and conservative media outlets, it is time to divert our attention to the parties that suffer from a more ideologically charged coverage. Our results pointed to a more polarised coverage of the parties that break away from bipartisanship than of the traditional groupings. In Spain, according to Orriols (2021), the levels of polarisation increased considerably at the time of the emergence on the political landscape of populist groupings ideologically located at the extremes (Vox and Sumar). These parties not only extend the left and right extremes of the party system, but also the axis of citizens' affections and information on politics (Mudde *et al.*, 2018). According to these same authors,

populism and polarisation are related insofar as populist parties arise as a reaction to the exhaustion of the centripetal consensus with the goal of repolarising the political conflict. Regardless of the populist connotations, Torcal (2020) also recognises greater levels of polarisation among the Podemos and Vox electorate. These results are consistent with our research, since Vox and Sumar are the ones with the highest levels of polarisation and their media coverage contains more negative sentiment values compared to traditional parties.

Finally, we asked ourselves whether or not, in conjunction with all the above, the media coverage of the activities of a given grouping depended on the affinity between the political colours of the editorial line and the party. In this regard, the specialised literature is broad and firm in its endorsement of our results. According to Ramírez-Dueñas and Humanes (2023), the political position of each media outlet, or the exercise of a militant role in the political coverage of each television channel, is closely related to political polarisation. Levenduski (2013) also showed that the partisan media outlets polarise the electorate, making citizens more extreme than before, to a greater or lesser extent.

Using these general assertions with respect to the situation in Spain, Pop *et al.* (2023) analyse the role that the various television channels give to the political leaders who are candidates for the presidency of the Government in the two elections of 2019. And they discover strong links between the editorial ideology and that of the groupings. In the case of TVE's Telediario 2 (also analysed in this research), the pre-eminence of the figure of the socialist candidate Pedro Sánchez was much higher than that of Pablo Casado, with the former appearing in 85% of the news items on his party's campaign, with the latter at 78%. In the Atresmedia group, however, Casado reached 100% of the space covered by his party's campaign for the November elections, while Sánchez was cited on only 60% of the occasions in which PSOE's strategy was mentioned. Also in Atresmedia, between the April and November 2019 elections, the leaders of the other parties suffered a 31% decrease in their coverage when their parties were talked about, going from 82% in the April elections to 52% in November. The editorial profile of the channel closest to the right and aimed at a centre and centre-right audience could be behind these types of results (Pop *et al.*, 2023).

Given our results, we have not been able to confirm that the channels present differences in their levels of polarisation or sentiment based on their ideology, as they have been categorised by previous studies. We do find, however, that the ideology of the editorial line could be associated with the values of sentiment and polarisation of the parties in their media coverage. We also recognise more positive coverage in regional broadcasters versus national broadcasters, as the latter have more negative sentiment means.

Finally, we must point out some limitations of both the concept of affective polarisation and its operationalisation in this work. Some criticisms highlight the complexity of delimiting polarisation in multi-party systems (Röllicke, 2023) or the need to distinguish individual and institutional factors from affective polarisation

(Romero-Martín *et al.*, 2024). In this research, we have assumed that the affective polarisation on the television channels analysed resides in the media treatment of information, to subsequently focus on identifying the differences between these levels of polarisation by channel, by party and by party within each channel. Under this assumption, we have not been able to address the discussion on the agents of polarisation—who generates polarisation—an issue that could be revisited in future research using appropriate data.

As a main limitation to this study, we recognise the difficulty of asserting conclusions following the analysis of media polarisation during a single electoral campaign. It would have been interesting to compare our results longitudinally between different elections, increasing the sample of news items covered. However, the availability of material on the TV channels' web servers is limited. With a broader database, even the most under-represented parties could be considered, including regional parties, some of which may be susceptible to even greater media polarisation. It would also be interesting to delve into the specific issues that could be covered in a polarising manner, beyond the limited context of electoral campaigns. In this regard, future research could address the sensitivity to media polarisation of certain key issues within the social debate. Recent studies have already addressed some of these issues by exploiting texts from the *online* debate (Serrano-Contreras *et al.*, 2020; Moreno-Mercado *et al.*, 2022) and the written press (Serrano-Contreras *et al.*, 2021). Automatic text transcription tools such as the one used in this work open a path towards addressing the generation of polarisation in audiovisual media outlets. In any event, we can affirm that this study will be continued through future research, which has already been designed focusing on the analysis of polarisation during the campaign in the press and on the various radio stations, both in their news programme sections and in their political discussions.

6. Acknowledgements

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Notes

1   The emergence (and subsequent consolidation) of radical right parties within the European parliamentary context not only represents a counterweight to progressive social advances, but also forces the ideological repositioning of traditional political parties (Ruiz and Danet, 2022) and deepens a polarised vision of society as a whole, normalising the discursive structures of "us" and "them" that in certain cases legitimise aggression and violence towards the opposing group (Lobato *et al.*, 2020).

2   This blatant bias is not only questionable in democratic terms, but looking at its formal dimension, it contravenes legislative mandates, as stated in Article 66.1 of the Spanish Law on General Elections (LOREG): "Respect for political and social pluralism, as well as equality, proportionality and information neutrality in the programming of publicly owned media outlets during the electoral period will be guaranteed by the organisation of said media outlets and their supervision provided for under Law […]." In turn, the following paragraph (Art. 66.2) reads: "During the electoral period, privately owned broadcasters must respect the principles of pluralism and equality."

3   For a detailed explanation of the usefulness of natural language processing techniques in social research, see Taboada (2024).

Annexes

Annex 1. Polarisation and sentiment by channel

Table 1

Descriptives of the measure of polarisation of news stories mentioning any of the four main national parties, by channel

	Polarisation								
	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	10th percentile	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile
Total	35.54	37.25	0.00	200.00	3.28	10.06	22.26	47.05	86.05
Antena 3	34.13	32.92	0.44	187.76	4.87	12.63	22.54	44.79	79.06
Canal Sur	47.97	48.07	0.14	177.53	4.88	12.86	30.76	66.35	116.59
La Sexta	34.94	36.73	0.00	200.00	2.27	9.52	22.97	45.43	78.08
TVE	32.15	31.15	0.14	179.31	3.42	9.66	23.10	44.42	71.21
Telecinco	35.54	43.21	0.14	170.71	2.59	7.31	16.35	44.38	97.57

Source: own research.

Table 2

Descriptives of the sentiment measure of news stories mentioning any of the four main national parties, by channel

	Polarisation								
	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	10th percentile	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile
Total	-0.080	0.280	-1.000	1.000	-0.380	-0.220	-0.080	0.010	0.240
Antena 3	-0.080	0.260	-0.870	0.930	-0.360	-0.220	-0.080	0.010	0.240
Canal Sur	0.040	0.350	-0.820	0.880	-0.330	-0.190	-0.040	0.220	0.460
La Sexta	-0.080	0.270	-0.900	1.000	-0.380	-0.230	-0.070	0.030	0.230
TVE	-0.100	0.240	-0.710	0.890	-0.390	-0.240	-0.090	0.010	0.160
Telecinco	-0.150	0.290	-1.000	0.750	-0.590	-0.270	-0.090	-0.030	0.070

Source: own research.

Annex 2. Polarisation and party sentiment

Table 1
Descriptives of the measure of polarisation of news stories mentioning any of the four main national parties, by channel

	Polarisation								
	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	10th percentile	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile
Total	35.54	37.25	0	200	3.28	10.06	22.26	47.05	86.05
PSOE	34.47	36.67	0	200	3.01	10.86	22.26	44.38	77.06
PP	30.5	33.08	0.14	177.53	2.59	8.58	17.4	41.9	71.21
Vox	40.28	39.24	0.14	177.53	3.42	12.36	29.66	52.96	94.54
Sumar	45.27	44.6	0.98	187.76	5.46	10.74	29.6	65.52	115.33

Source: own research.

Table 2
Descriptives of the sentiment measure of news stories mentioning any of the four main national parties, by channel

	Polarisation								
	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	10th percentile	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	90th percentile
Total	-0.080	0.280	-1.000	1.000	-0.380	-0.220	-0.080	0.010	0.240
PSOE	-0.050	0.270	-0.900	1.000	-0.310	-0.220	-0.070	0.030	0.280
PP	-0.050	0.240	-1.000	0.880	-0.310	-0.170	-0.060	0.030	0.200
Vox	-0.150	0.290	-1.000	0.880	-0.500	-0.290	-0.150	-0.020	0.190
Sumar	-0.110	0.340	-0.870	0.930	-0.500	-0.290	-0.140	-0.020	0.320

Source: own research.

Annex 3. Two-way ANOVA

Table 1

Two-way ANOVA polarisation by party and channel

Channel	Party (I)	Party (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig.	95% CI for difference	
						Lower limit	Upper limit
Antena 3	PP	PSOE	-3.461	6.300	0.583	-15.832	8.911
		Sumar	-22.810	9.462	0.016	-41.390	-4.231
		Vox	-12.465	7.344	0.090	-26.885	1.956
	PSOE	PP	3.461	6.300	0.583	-8.911	15.832
		Sumar	-19.350	9.278	0.037	-37.567	-1.132
		Vox	-9.004	7.105	0.206	-22.955	4.947
	Sumar	PP	22.810	9.462	0.016	4.231	41.39
		PSOE	19.350	9.278	0.037	1.132	37.567
		Vox	10.346	10.016	0.302	-9.321	30.013
	Vox	PP	12.465	7.344	0.090	-1.956	26.885
		PSOE	9.004	7.105	0.206	-4.947	22.955
		Sumar	-10.346	10.016	0.302	-30.013	9.321
Canal Sur	PP	PSOE	13.585	10.588	0.200	-7.206	34.377
		Sumar	-17.369	18.265	0.342	-53.234	18.495
		Vox	1.205	12.604	0.924	-23.544	25.954
	PSOE	PP	-13.585	10.588	0.200	-34.377	7.206
		Sumar	-30.954	17.949	0.085	-66.199	4.29
		Vox	-12.380	12.142	0.308	-36.221	11.461
	Sumar	PP	17.369	18.265	0.342	-18.495	53.234
		PSOE	30.954	17.949	0.085	-4.290	66.199
		Vox	18.574	19.207	0.334	-19.140	56.289
	Vox	PP	-1.205	12.604	0.924	-25.954	23.544
		PSOE	12.380	12.142	0.308	-11.461	36.221
		Sumar	-18.574	19.207	0.334	-56.289	19.14
La Sexta	PP	PSOE	-7.773	7.578	0.305	-22.652	7.107
		Sumar	-4.404	9.433	0.641	-22.927	14.12
		Vox	-17.354	8.434	0.040	-33.915	-0.792
	PSOE	PP	7.773	7.578	0.305	-7.107	22.652
		Sumar	3.369	9.893	0.734	-16.057	22.795
		Vox	-9.581	8.945	0.285	-27.146	7.984
	Sumar	PP	4.404	9.433	0.641	-14.120	22.927
		PSOE	-3.369	9.893	0.734	-22.795	16.057
		Vox	-12.950	10.563	0.221	-33.692	7.792
	Vox	PP	17.354	8.434	0.040	0.792	33.915
		PSOE	9.581	8.945	0.285	-7.984	27.146
		Sumar	12.950	10.563	0.221	-7.792	33.692

						95% CI for difference	
Channel	Party (I)	Party (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig.	Lower limit	Upper limit
TVE	PP	PSOE	-8.711	7.616	0.253	-23.665	6.244
		Sumar	-8.218	11.078	0.458	-29.971	13.535
		Vox	-2.382	8.253	0.773	-18.588	13.824
	PSOE	PP	8.711	7.616	0.253	-6.244	23.665
		Sumar	0.492	11.377	0.965	-21.848	22.833
		Vox	6.328	8.651	0.465	-10.658	23.315
	Sumar	PP	8.218	11.078	0.458	-13.535	29.971
		PSOE	-0.492	11.377	0.965	-22.833	21.848
		Vox	5.836	11.813	0.621	-17.361	29.032
	Vox	PP	2.382	8.253	0.773	-13.824	18.588
		PSOE	-6.328	8.651	0.465	-23.315	10.658
		Sumar	-5.836	11.813	0.621	-29.032	17.361
Telecinco	PP	PSOE	-3.907	8.813	0.658	-21.211	13.398
		Sumar	-28.433	11.701	0.015	-51.409	-5.457
		Vox	-11.618	8.651	0.180	-28.605	5.368
	PSOE	PP	3.907	8.813	0.658	-13.398	21.211
		Sumar	-24.526	12.241	0.046	-48.563	-0.489
		Vox	-7.712	9.369	0.411	-26.108	10.685
	Sumar	PP	28.433	11.701	0.015	5.457	51.409
		PSOE	24.526	12.241	0.046	0.489	48.563
		Vox	16.815	12.125	0.166	-6.994	40.624
	Vox	PP	11.618	8.651	0.180	-5.368	28.605
		PSOE	7.712	9.369	0.411	-10.685	26.108
		Sumar	-16.815	12.125	0.166	-40.624	6.994

Pairwise comparisons
Dependent variable: polarisation

Based on estimated marginal means.

Note *: the difference in means is significant at the 0.05 level.

Note b: adjustment for various comparisons: least significant difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Source: own research.

Annex 4. Polarisation and sentiment by channel and party

Table 1

Descriptives of the polarisation measure by channel and party

		Polarisation								
		Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Ptil. 10	Ptil. 25	Median	Ptil. 75	Ptil. 90
Antena 3	PSOE	31.40	30.46	0.44	169.81	4.88	11.44	21.12	41.22	71.21
	PP	27.94	26.05	0.67	133.58	4.06	12.55	20.70	37.75	62.22
	Vox	40.40	30.64	0.69	110.49	8.17	17.23	33.89	52.96	88.79
	Sumar	50.75	54.46	0.98	187.76	6.36	10.40	26.48	74.65	145.76
Canal Sur	PSOE	38.75	38.25	4.88	177.53	8.77	13.39	26.21	58.92	88.45
	PP	52.34	54.72	0.14	177.53	2.42	6.57	45.09	92.02	137.29
	Vox	51.13	49.16	0.69	177.53	7.82	16.91	37.39	56.57	116.59
	Sumar	69.71	65.66	3.18	177.53	3.18	44.62	46.93	76.28	177.53
La Sexta	PSOE	36.49	44.25	0.00	200.00	2.44	7.97	19.72	44.53	93.58
	PP	28.71	28.69	0.61	158.27	1.20	10.38	18.40	38.31	66.85
	Vox	46.07	42.91	1.20	158.27	5.91	12.83	31.96	61.45	134.20
	Sumar	33.12	28.18	3.21	113.14	4.06	12.34	25.70	44.45	65.52
TVE	PSOE	36.91	39.08	1.20	179.31	3.21	12.56	27.18	41.20	78.08
	PP	28.20	26.80	0.85	118.45	5.84	9.48	16.91	40.57	65.41
	Vox	30.58	23.79	0.14	86.61	2.11	9.02	30.69	48.69	60.78
	Sumar	36.41	35.29	5.46	116.51	5.84	7.31	24.49	60.71	86.61
Telecinco	PSOE	32.11	36.38	1.38	145.30	2.14	3.41	22.04	44.36	85.91
	PP	28.20	37.59	0.14	170.71	2.59	7.31	14.26	35.27	69.24
	Vox	39.82	51.80	0.14	170.71	3.41	6.25	16.52	44.38	144.05
	Sumar	56.64	48.40	3.21	131.27	7.76	13.26	42.11	94.54	125.86

Source: own research.

Table 2

Descriptives of the sentiment measure by channel and party

		Polarisation								
		Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Ptil. 10	Ptil. 25	Median	Ptil. 75	Ptil. 90
Antena 3	PSOE	-0.070	0.240	-0.730	0.840	-0.370	-0.220	-0.070	0.020	0.220
	PP	-0.040	0.200	-0.550	0.640	-0.250	-0.190	-0.050	0.040	0.200
	Vox	-0.160	0.260	-0.610	0.520	-0.500	-0.310	-0.210	-0.060	0.190
	Sumar	-0.050	0.410	-0.870	0.930	-0.480	-0.220	-0.090	0.060	0.580
Canal Sur	PSOE	0.050	0.270	-0.250	0.880	-0.220	-0.160	-0.010	0.240	0.400
	PP	0.030	0.400	-0.820	0.880	-0.380	-0.110	-0.040	0.190	0.420
	Vox	0.010	0.380	-0.380	0.880	-0.360	-0.240	-0.100	0.190	0.550
	Sumar	0.090	0.520	-0.330	0.880	-0.330	-0.320	-0.100	0.330	0.880
La Sexta	PSOE	-0.030	0.310	-0.900	1.000	-0.280	-0.120	-0.040	0.030	0.270
	PP	-0.070	0.220	-0.590	0.770	-0.310	-0.180	-0.080	0.020	0.150
	Vox	-0.160	0.330	-0.890	0.770	-0.570	-0.330	-0.150	-0.010	0.250
	Sumar	-0.050	0.240	-0.430	0.530	-0.290	-0.190	-0.060	0.060	0.260
TVE	PSOE	-0.060	0.290	-0.620	0.890	-0.290	-0.240	-0.090	0.030	0.200
	PP	-0.070	0.210	-0.600	0.560	-0.360	-0.170	-0.050	0.010	0.160
	Vox	-0.120	0.210	-0.550	0.280	-0.390	-0.270	-0.090	0.010	0.160
	Sumar	-0.260	0.210	-0.710	-0.040	-0.550	-0.410	-0.210	-0.110	-0.040
Telecinco	PSOE	-0.120	0.260	-0.740	0.700	-0.360	-0.270	-0.080	-0.020	0.100
	PP	-0.070	0.250	-1.000	0.750	-0.290	-0.150	-0.060	0.000	0.180
	Vox	-0.240	0.310	-1.000	0.300	-0.860	-0.310	-0.140	-0.060	0.010
	Sumar	-0.250	0.370	-0.790	0.420	-0.760	-0.590	-0.170	-0.040	0.190

Source: own research.

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She completed the professor training course in the Department of Political Science at the University of Granada (UGR). Her line of research focuses on the rural world and the different ways it is handled by political parties, the media outlets and the urban environment. Through rural political science, she has experience working with ideology, political and electoral behaviour, and polarisation. She holds a double degree in law and political science (UGR), a master's degree in constitutional law (UIMP-CEPC) and a postgraduate certificate in applied social research (CIS).

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