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Organization Still Matters: Parties' Characteristics, Posting and Followers' Reactions on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Use of social media by political parties has become a part of their communication strategies. In Catalonia, where around 20% of Internet users obtain political information through Facebook and Twitter, parties use these channels widely. This article has examined 814 posts, 5,772 comments, 52,470 likes and 25,907 shares from the official Facebook pages of Catalan parties in order to ascertain the relevance of the classical party characteristics (party size, level of institutionalization, centralization of decision-making, position at the ideological cleavages) on how parties and their followers behave on Facebook. The data sustain that the characteristics of Catalan parties have an influence on their posting behaviour on Facebook, and mould the reactions (comments, likes and shares) of their Facebook followers to these posts. The results further show that small and new parties achieve greater engagement than bigger and more institutionalized parties.

KEYWORDS

Catalonia, Cleavages, Facebook, Followers, Party Centralization, Parties' Organization, Political Parties, Posting Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Social media pose a variety of challenges and opportunities to political parties. They¹ offer the possibility of a level of interaction between parties and the public that was previously absent, and give voters the 'chance of entering into a real online dialogue with representatives' (Mackay, 2010, p. 23), enhance relationship building and allow individual citizens to make, contribute, filter and share content (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012). However, the organizational adaptation of parties to these new channels of electronic communication puts participatory pressure on their hierarchical structures (Gustafsson, 2012, p. 1,123), blurring their classic strategy, based on a sharp differentiation between their members and the public (Margetts, 2001; Löfgren, 2003). In this way, parties combine a variety of media channels – from traditional mass media to social media – and are being involved in transformations that challenge party centralization and traditional party elites in a communicative environment described as a 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2013; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

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Parties are political actors with primary goals (Harmel & Janda, 1994) and organizational characteristics, and behaving strategically to win elections and influence policies. All of these determine how they deal with social media, just as what happened with previous online tools such as websites, chats and forums (Padró-Solanet & Cardenal 2008; Cardenal, 2011). In brief, parties' adaptation to this new digital environment seems to be mediated by their goals, organization, position on the ideological cleavages, power situation and electoral strength.

This article seeks to analyse the behaviour of Catalan parties with seats in the Catalan parliament, together with their followers on the party Facebook pages. We consider that party characteristics in general and party organization in particular have an influence over interaction on parties' Facebook pages. Specifically, we examine the relationship between parties' main characteristics, their Facebook posting behaviour and the responses given by their Facebook followers to these posts.

The understanding of how parties' characteristics are affecting party use of social media depends on detailed empirical analysis rooted in specific cases and countries (Wall & Sudulich, 2010). The Catalan case is an addition from southern Europe to a field where other studies have already focused on countries with a proportional electoral system but which are mainly drawn from Northern Europe. And it is a particularly suitable case study because of the wide-spread use of the Internet and social media, the early adoption of social media by parties, and the multiparty system that provides sufficient variability between the analysed characteristics of the parties.

Our period of analysis is not long, between 15 January and 15 February, 2013; it is perhaps prone to short term conditions and factors. However, since the volume of data retrieved from parties' Facebook pages is quite high (384 posts, 5,772 comments, 52,470 likes and 25,907 shares) and our research considers the entirety of the current Catalan parties, we believe that the time span is sufficient to shed light on some of the present controversies concerning social media and parties. Moreover, as far as we know, this is the first time that a work aims to study the relation between parties' characteristics, parties' posting behaviour, and their Facebook followers' engagement in this so-called new 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2013).

The following section outlines the literature on parties and Facebook use. Following this, we set out the context for the Catalan multiparty system, the current political context, and the Catalan public's use of Facebook during our period of analysis. Next, we give details of the research design and the construction of variables, stating the hypotheses to be tested. We then present the analysis and findings of the article. Finally, there is the discussion and conclusions on the results, outlining potential avenues for future research in this area.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Since their inception, political parties' organizations have mutated hand in hand with the changes in society unleashed by the appearance of new forms of communication. However, the academic controversy regarding parties' organization and communication was given a boost with the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0.

As happened with other previous forms of mass communication, the use parties make of the Internet and social media depends on organizational characteristics, ideology and electoral situation. Consequently, we will review the literature dealing with party characteristics that influence parties' use of the Internet and social media both from an international perspective and from a Catalan point of view.

Party Characteristics that Influence Parties' Use of the Internet and Social Media: An International Perspective

Several authors have studied the goals, organizational factors and political and institutional environment that could have an effect on political parties' online behaviour (Ward & Gibson, 2000; Römmele, 2003; Gibson & Römmele, 2003; Chadwick & Anstead, 2009; Sudulich, 2009; Wall & Sudulich, 2011; Gibson, 2015). Most of these studies are inspired in the classic literature that understands parties as actors with their own goals and organizational characteristics, constrained by the institutional and political context (Janda, 1980; Ström, 1990; Deschouwer, 1992; Harmel & Janda, 1994).

Römmele (2003) was one of the first to point out that parties' use of ICTs will not be uniform and will depend on their goals and objectives. She elaborated a classification of parties' adaptation to ICTs based on the link between their primary goals (maximize votes, implement policies, promote internal democracy and seek office) and their online behaviour (communication strategy, target audience and message). According to her, parties which focus on maximizing their votes and seeking office will adopt a top-down communication strategy, whereas those seeking to implement policies and increase their internal democracy will develop bottom-up and participatory communication strategies. The former goals and communication strategy would correspond to catch-all and cartel parties and the later would be related to mass parties (Römmele, 2003, p. 14).

In addition, one of the most important factors affecting parties' behaviour both online and offline is the level of centralization. Wall & Sudulich's (2010) analysis of Irish political parties assessed the effects of their degree of centralization on their online behaviour. The dependent variable of the study was the extent of interactive content on parties' websites, and the independent variables comprised five dimensions: (1) nationalization of structure, (2) selection of the party leader, (3) selection of the parliamentary candidates, (4) formulation of party policies, (5) administration of discipline. These were derived from Janda's (1980) index of centralization of decisions (Wall & Sudulich, 2011, p. 579). The research discovered that centralized and hierarchically organized parties developed fewer opportunities for online interaction on their webpages than parties with less centralized and hierarchical organizations.

More recently, Vaccari (2013) aimed to explain the relation between parties' characteristics (incumbency, ideology and organization) and their online presence, mainly in party and candidates' websites. His data for parties and candidates from Australia, France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States provided evidence to refute Karpf's 'outparty innovation incentives' theory (Karpf, 2012) which states that parties out of power will have more incentives to adopt and use new technologies than parties in power. Vaccari's findings showed that for the countries mentioned above, incumbents outperformed challengers by about two points in the information index of their webpages and one point in the participation and delivery dimensions, with these differences being statistically significant (Vaccari, 2013, p.103). Furthermore, Vaccari's results demonstrated that the webpages of left-wing parties 'offered a greater number of engagement opportunities and informative contents' compared to those of the right-wing parties (Vaccari, 2013, p. 108). One of the reasons raised by Vaccari to explain the differences between the online behaviour of the left-wing parties and right-wing parties was their organizational culture, i.e. left-wing and green parties are based on grass-roots organizations and therefore they seem to be 'particularly at ease with the decentralizing affordances offered by the Internet' (Vaccari, 2013, p. 108).

It was the advent of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), however, that opened a new dimension in the possibilities offered by ICTs to political parties and their representatives. The changing role of the citizenry and non-elites from political information consumers to political information co-producers (Copeland & Römmele, 2014) blurred the organizational capacity of parties to control the one-way information flows which characterized Web 1.0, thereby triggering multiple and unexpected consequences on parties' relations with their members and voters (Chadwick, 2013). These factors (together with Barack's Obama use of social media in the 2008 presidential campaign – see Karlsen, 2012) triggered a flood of research aiming to understand the new environment of 'social media politics'.

Lynch and Hogan's study was one of the first attempts to understand the effects of social media in political parties. It revealed an interesting dichotomy: while no Irish party regarded social networks as better than traditional communication methods (Lynch & Hogan, 2012, p. 92), the young participants in the study felt social network sites should form part of a party's overarching communications strategy (Lynch & Hogan, 2012, p. 95). From a political participation perspective, Gustafsson (2012) studied the characteristics of Swedish social media users and their participation around parties. His main concern was to analyse the effect of social media on political parties' hierarchies and he discovered that social networking sites had eroded internal hierarchies as 'collaboration across local party branches had been made easier. As information no longer had to go through central boards, informal networks were perceived as easier to form and maintain' (Gustafsson, 2012, p. 1,117).

In their research of Danish politics, Skovsgaard & Van Dalen (2013) found that politicians used Twitter and Facebook to strengthen their position in intraparty competition, and that communicating directly with voters was a key motivation for being active on social media. Moreover, Klinger's study of Swiss parties' behaviour on Facebook and Twitter showed that during the 2011 Swiss election, small parties did not benefit from the potential offered by social media, whereas the dominant parties with larger number of voters gained more resonance online and were better able to facilitate reciprocal activity on Facebook (Klinger, 2013, p. 731).

In the case of Norway, Larsson's (2014) comparison of the political actors' use of Facebook pages in Norway and Sweden discovered that minor parties 'were not only comparably more ardent in posting to their Facebook Pages – it would also appear that they succeeded in gaining online support as their posts were shared and liked at levels sometimes corresponding to the spread enjoyed by more established parties' (Larsson, 2014, p. 14). In this same regard, Kalsnes' (2016) analysis of the interaction strategy and online responsiveness – using semi-structured interviews and data from parties' Facebook pages – of three major and two minor Norwegian parties during the 2013 elections showed that minor parties were comparatively more interactive (in percentage of the total number of comments) than major parties. Moreover, his in-depth interviews indicated the parties' awareness of the relation between the type of content of their Facebook posts and the engagement that this content might trigger. As stated, for example, by the political communication director of the Norwegian Labour Party 'images and videos are mentioned as material particularly well-suited to publishing on Facebook to engage and encourage sharing' (Kalsnes, 2016, p. 5).

Lastly, another promising line of research was the one initiated by Gibson (2015), in which she studied 'citizen-initiated campaigns'. These are online campaigns launched by party supporters (who are not necessarily members of these organizations) that use the web tools created by the parties or the candidates' teams (Gibson, 2015, p. 5). The Facebook and Twitter accounts of either the parties or their supporters are crucial elements in these campaigns.

Party Characteristics that Influence Parties' Use of the Internet and Social Media: A Catalan Perspective

Some research has also been conducted on the Catalan parties and their representatives' behaviour in Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 communication environments, yet in comparison to other countries this research has been limited.

Padró-Solanet & Cardenal (2008) and Cardenal (2011) studied how Catalan parties' characteristics influenced the interactive and participatory features that they offered in their webpages. They showed that in the specific case of Catalan and Spanish political parties, their internal characteristics and their position in the electoral market structured the interactive and participatory channels that parties offered on their webpages. They also discovered that big parties (above all when they are in opposition) tended to open more communication and participatory channels on their webpages (Cardenal, 2011, p. 95). By the same token, parties that were less ideologically coherent and had small organizations tended to develop more horizontal channels of participation and communication (Ibidem). This fact

triggered a far greater development of channels to support the party or activate its networks of contacts (Cardenal, 2011, pp. 96-97; Padró-Solanet & Cardenal, 2008, p. 57-58).

Following this line of research, 'Authors removed' (2013) conducted an exploratory study to shed light on the relation between Catalan parties' centralization of decisions (CiU, ERC and PSC) and the participatory and interactional features offered by these parties in their websites and Facebook pages. Specifically, we wanted to uncover possible differences between the behaviour of parties in Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. The results showed that the degree of centralization of decision making for the three parties was high, and that there were no significant differences in terms of the participatory features offered by these parties in their webpages. Moreover, interaction on Catalan parties' Facebook pages appeared to depend much more on the predominant issues of the Catalan agenda than on the level of centralization of their decision making.

A more recent work studying Catalan parties and their representatives' behaviour on Facebook and Twitter conducted by 'Author removed' (2015) corroborated previous results found by Larsson (2015) in Norway and Sweden, and Kalsnes (2016) in Norway, which provided evidence of the fact that minor parties were comparatively more interactive on Web 2.0 than major parties. Additionally, this research (Author removed, 2015) pointed to Catalan parties' difficulties in adapting their organizations to the social media environment and in understanding the new participation and engagement logics triggered by Web 2.0.

Last, it is important to note that when analysing the online behaviour of Catalan parties, scholars (Serrano, 2007; Bartomeus & Medina, 2010; Padró-Solanet & Cardenal, 2008; 'Author removed', 2013) pinpoint the necessity of considering their position on the cleavage structure of the Catalan party system which is divided between the Left-/Right-wing and non-Catalan-nationalist/Catalan nationalist cleavages.

POLITICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONTEXTS: THE CATALAN CASE

Catalonia has interesting traits for this study such as the wide use of the Internet and social media, the variety of parties represented in the Catalan Parliament and a conflictual political environment that is being reflected and expanded by social media.

The Political Context

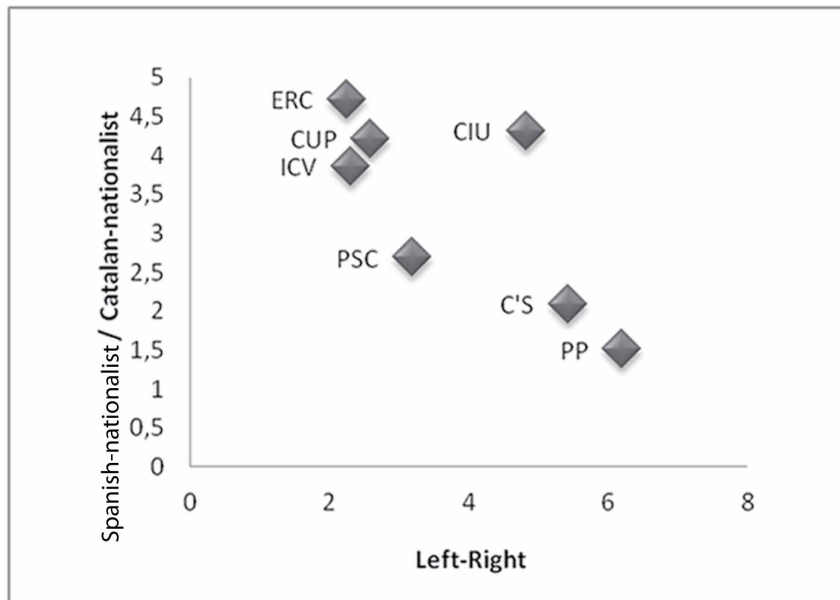
The elections to the Catalan Parliament in November 2012 were exceptional elections. Following the massive protest march in Barcelona on 11 September 2012 in favour of the independence of Catalonia, the Catalan Prime Minister Artur Mas dissolved Parliament on 28 September 2012 and called elections for 25 November 2012. These elections were characterized by the discussions on Catalonia's right to hold a referendum on independence or to become an independent state and the effects of the economic crisis and the expenditure cuts implemented by the Catalan government.

Participation in the elections was up by almost 10 percentage points with respect to the 2010 elections (from 60% in 2010 to 69.6% in 2012), and Artur Mas and his party CiU won the elections again, achieving more than 1 million votes and 50 seats in the Catalan Parliament. They, however, lost an important share of votes and seats, while other more radical pro-independence parties such as ERC and CUP achieved a huge increase in terms of votes and seats (400,850 votes and 24 seats in total). In fact, CUP entered the Catalan Parliament for the first time. At the beginning of 2013, Catalan public support for the independence of Catalonia extended to half of the population (46.4% of respondents were in favour) (CEO, 2013).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the Catalan parties along the two main ideological cleavages (Left-Right wing and Non-Catalan nationalist/Catalan Nationalist) after the 2012 elections.

CiU stands for 'Convergència i Unió' and is a centre-right Catalan nationalist party. PSC is the Socialist Party of Catalonia, which in the 2012 elections got 20 seats. ERC stands for Republican Left of Catalonia and it is a left-wing pro-independence party and in 2012 it won 21 seats. C's stands

Figure 1. The position of the Catalan parties on the Catalan political cleavages according to the CEO respondents



for 'Citizens' and it is a centrist party opposed to Catalan nationalism, which won 9 seats. PP is the Popular Party of Catalonia, a right-wing and Spanish nationalist party with 19 seats. ICV-EUiA is a left-wing party self-defined as eco-socialist, which won 13 seats. And CUP stands for 'Candidacies of Popular Unity', it is an extreme left and pro-independence coalition and in the 2012 election they won 3 seats in Parliament.

After the November elections, several political events shaped the Catalan political agenda and developed through our period of analysis. First, on 19 December 2012, CiU and ERC signed the 'Agreement for the National Transition and the Guarantee of Parliamentary Stability for the Government of Catalonia'. Second, on 23 January 2013, the Catalan Parliament passed 'Resolution 5/X approving the Declaration of Sovereignty and the Right of the People of Catalonia to Decide'. Lastly, the political agenda of our period of analysis was marked by two corruption scandals: the *Barcenas* affair (illegal financing of the PP at Spanish level) and the *Camarga* affair (illegal recordings at the Catalan level). The CEO survey of 14 February, and previous analysis of the parties' Facebook pages showed that these events were being reflected into public opinion, as well as concern about the economic readjustments and crisis in Catalonia ('Author removed', 2013).

The Technological Context

Catalonia is the second Autonomous Community of Spain in terms of Facebook users (3,448,980), just behind Madrid (Bluemarket, 2013). In terms of age and gender characteristics of Catalan Facebook users, many of them (734,140) are concentrated in the 18–24 age band in which there is a slight predominance of men (389,500) over women (344,640) (Ibidem). Taking Facebook and Twitter together, 68% of the Internet users participate in these social media (Fundación Telefónica, 2014, p.138). By 2009 (five years after Facebook's launch in 2004) most of the Catalan political parties had launched their Facebook pages.

With respect to the way that the Catalan public obtains political information, according to figures from the CEO survey on 13 June 2013, in our period of study social media were used to obtain political information by 18.3% of respondents.

Table 1 shows the different platforms used by Catalan voters (for each of the parties with seats in the Catalan Parliament) in terms of the mass media and the Internet.

Television is still the predominant platform used by voters of all parties to obtain political information. Newspapers come in second place and radio is used by voters for all parties in a similar way. However, the biggest differences emerge amongst party voters when it comes to the Internet: while CUP (71.7%) and ICV-EUIA (55.2%) voters come highest, PP (22.1%) and PSC (24.8%) voters come lowest; CiU (39.6%), ERC (49.5%) and C's (42.1%) voters are at similar levels. Lastly, in terms of social media, the most interesting aspect is the high levels reached by ERC (21.1%), ICV-EUIA (26.2%) and CUP (25.3%) in comparison with the other parties.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND HYPOTHESES

This study seeks to measure to what extent parties' characteristics affect the way in which Facebook is used by political parties and their Facebook followers. We will analyse five standard party characteristics drawn from the literature explained in previous sections, having been proven successful in explaining online party behaviour: party size, institutionalization, centralization of decisions, left-right ideology and national identification. The dependent variables are parties' posting behaviour (measured by the number of posts yielded by parties and the number of comments deleted by parties) and followers' engagement (measured by the number of posts, likes and shares).

The first hypothesis that we will test is related to party size. As we have shown in the literature review section, previous works (Padró-Solanet & Cardenal, 2008) on Catalan parties' websites have pointed out that big parties have more economic and human resources to use in their online activities than small parties. In Switzerland, larger and more dominant parties have more followers on Facebook than smaller parties (Klinger, 2013). However, more recent studies indicate that minor parties in Norway and Sweden were more interactive than major parties (Larsson, 2014; Kalsnes, 2016). These contradictory results are probably due, apart from the countries' particularities, to the different timing of the studies: the data for the latter studies are from 2013 but the former are from 2007 (Catalan parties' webpages) and 2011 (Switzerland). In that period of time, minor parties could have caught up with more established and resource-rich parties following the so-called equalization processes in the use of ICTs (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Strandberg, 2013). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Both party posting activity and followers' engagement will be higher for medium-size and small Catalan parties than for the big parties and semi-big parties.

Table 1. Platforms used by Catalan voters to obtain political information (2013)

Political Parties/ Media (%)	PP (57)	CiU (561)	ERC (313)	PSC (134)	ICV-EUIA (203)	C's (73)	CUP (68)
Television	93.5	88.5	88.1	88.9	76.5	87.9	64.1
Radio	44.8	46.1	52.4	46.2	49.3	40.3	38.3
Newspapers	48.5	66.0	66.9	48.2	68.9	65.5	58.8
Internet	22.1	39.6	49.5	24.8	55.4	42.1	71.7
Friends, relatives and acquaintances	26.6	43.6	49.9	41	45.8	44.7	54.3
Social Network Sites (Facebook and Twitter)	14.7	11.1	21.1	10	26.2	10.4	25.3

Source: First round of the CEO surveys (22 February 2013); N = 2000 (Weighted base)

Related to party size, our research will test the role played by parties' level of institutionalization in their behaviour on Facebook. Findings in the literature show diverse results; while in the Catalan online political scenario less institutionalized parties developed more interactive and participatory features in their websites than the institutionalized parties (Cardenal, 2011), in the context of Switzerland institutionalized parties developed more reciprocity on Facebook than less institutionalized parties (Klinger, 2013). We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The less-institutionalized Catalan parties' posting activity and Facebook followers' engagement will be higher than the posting activity and Facebook followers' engagement of the institutionalized Catalan parties.

Previous works in this field have also stated the relevance of parties' centralization of decisions in explaining parties' online behaviour. More precisely, the findings of Padró-Solanet & Cardenal (2008) in the Catalan party system, and those of Wall and Sudulich (2010) in the Irish political context revealed that centralized and hierarchically organized parties did not develop as much interactive and participatory features in their websites as decentralized parties. Consequently, given the relation between parties' centralization of decisions and their online interactive behaviour we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: The Catalan parties' degree of centralization will influence both the control that they exert over their Facebook pages and their Facebook followers' level of engagement, that means, the more centralized the party is, the more comments the party will delete and the less committed their Facebook followers will behave.

In the particular case of Catalonia, the Catalan parties' position on the two cleavages of the Catalan party system (Left/Right and non-Catalan-nationalist/Catalan nationalist) has also been considered a factor of their online and offline behaviour (Serrano, 2007; 'Author removed', 2013; 'Author removed', 2015). Also, research findings have pointed out that mass parties carrying out participatory communication strategies (Römmele, 2003) and left-wing parties (Vaccari, 2013) are more open to facilitating online interaction in their webpages than cartel parties carrying out top-down communication strategies and right-wing parties. Moreover, the independence claims and economic crises related factors shaping the current Catalan political agenda seem to be reinforcing the role played by the Catalan cleavages in determining Catalan parties' online behaviour. Consequently, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4: Left-wing Catalan parties will have a higher posting activity and more Facebook followers' engagement and will delete fewer comments than right-wing Catalan parties.

H5: Catalan-nationalist parties will have a higher posting activity and more Facebook followers' engagement and will delete fewer comments than non-Catalan-nationalist parties.

To test these hypotheses empirically we will first measure the main characteristics of the Catalan political parties. Following the research conducted by Padró-Solanet & Cardenal (2008) and Cardenal (2011) we will examine: (a) The size of the party²; (b) The party's ideology³; and (c) The party's institutionalization⁴. However, in our study we have added one more characteristic to Padró-Solanet and Cardenal's research: (d) Party's position on the national identification axis. Finally, we will measure the (e) Centralization of party organizations by adopting a coding scheme based on K. Janda's (1980) measure of the centralization of decision, and inspiring on the analysis already carried out by Lundell (2004) and Wall & Sudulich (2010). We will use a standardized index made of the original 8 dimensions figured out by Janda (1980), that ranges from 1 (total centralization of decisions) to 0

(total decentralization). Party statutes shown in parties' websites during the period of analysis have been examined to ascertain the position of the parties in each dimension. The 8 dimensions are: 1) Nationalization of the structure; 2) Selecting the leader of the party; 3) Selection of the parliamentary candidates; 4) Funding distribution; 5) Formulation of the policies; 6) Control of the communications; 7) Administration of the discipline and 8) Leadership concentration.

With relation to the dependent variables, we will extract from parties' Facebook pages all the parties' posts and followers' responses from 15 January to 15 February, 2013. To do so, we will use the Netvizz application. Then we will process this data with the Gephi program. We will tackle parties' Facebook posting behaviour by analysing the following dimensions: (a) The total number of posts published by the Catalan parties; (b) Their daily average of posts published; (c) The characteristics of their posts (text only, text with video or links, or text with photos); (d) The total number of deleted comments divided by the total number of comments posted on Facebook by the Catalan political parties. From these four dimensions, hypotheses are focused mainly on explaining party factors affecting the total number of posts published and deleted by the parties. The analysis of the other two dimensions will help to nuance or complete the results of the hypotheses testing.

Facebook followers' posting responses will be examined by looking at: (a) The total number of comments by the parties' Facebook followers on their Facebook posts; (b) The total number of likes by the parties' Facebook followers' to their Facebook posts; (c) The total number of likes to the Facebook followers' comments; (d) The total number of shares of the parties' Facebook posts; and (e) The engagement (likes + comments + shares) generated by the parties' Facebook posts. This last joint dimension is the one analysed in the hypotheses.

Regarding the methods that will be used in the hypotheses testing, the small N of this kind of studies (limited number of parties in every country, cf. Wall & Sudulich, 2010; Padró-Solanet & Cardenal, 2008) does not recommend to undertake parametric statistical analysis, so we rely on visual description and non-parametric statistics. First, graphics and data visualizations will be used to ascertain the direction of the relationships stated in the hypotheses. In the case of the numeric explanatory variables (party size, centralization, Catalan/non-Catalan cleavage, left-right ideology) their influence on the dependent variables will be visualized by displaying bar graphs for each hypothesis. The dependent variables (total posts, comments deleted and level of engagement) will be transformed into standardized values to display them altogether in the graphics. Then, we will calculate bivariate coefficients of association between the variables and conduct an analysis of variance. Two non-parametric coefficients will be employed – Kendall's tau and Spearman's rho – to examine the bivariate association between each of the four numeric explanatory variables and the three dependent variables.

ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

We first provide the values of the five explanatory variables (party size, institutionalization, centralization, Catalan nationalist/non-Catalan-nationalist cleavage and left-right ideology) that are included in our hypotheses and show Catalan parties and their Facebook followers' posting behaviour on Facebook. Then we test our hypotheses.

Explanatory and Dependent Variables

Table 2 shows the five main characteristics of the political parties with seats in the Catalan Parliament.

After the 2012 election, there was only one big party (CiU), two semi-big parties (ERC and PSC), two medium-size parties (PP and ICV-EUIA) and two small parties (C's and CUP). Five out of seven parties fell into the category of institutionalized parties (ERC, CiU, PSC, PP and ICV-EUIA), while C's and CUP are new parties. In terms of party ideology, Catalan political parties span a wide range from left to right, with respondents of the representative CEO survey rating Catalan parties from 2.26 (ERC) to 6.2 (PP). When it comes to the parties' degree of centralization of decisions, Table 2

Table 2. Characteristics of Catalan parties with seats in the Catalan Parliament

Parties	Party Size (Seats)	Party Institutionalization	Ideology (0-7)* (Left-Right Axis)	Degree of Centralization (0-1)	Position on the National Identification Axis (0-5)**
PP	Medium-Size (19)	Institutionalized	6.2	0.81	1.51
CiU	Major (50)	Institutionalized	4.82	0.81	4.31
ERC	Semi-Big (21)	Institutionalized	2.26	0.70	4.72
PSC	Semi-Big (20)	Institutionalized	3.19	0.77	2.69
ICV-EUIA	Medium Size (13)	Institutionalized	2.3	0.68	3.86
C'S	Minor (9)	New	5.42	0.75	2.09
CUP	Minor (3)	New	2.6	0.48	4.21

* Mean from total survey respondents, 0 = extreme left to 7 = extreme right. CEO survey of 20 June. N = 2000.

** Mean from total survey respondents, 0 = only Spanish to 5 = only Catalan. CEO survey of 20 June. N = 2000.

shows that there are three groups of parties: (a) Decentralized parties (CUP = 0.48; ICV-EUIA = 0.68); Semi-centralized parties (ERC = 0.7; C's = 0.75; PSC = 0.77); and Highly-centralized parties (CiU = 0.81; PP = 0.81). Lastly, the positioning of the Catalan parties on the national identification axis shows four Catalan (ERC = 4.61; CiU = 4.31; CUP = 4.21; ICV-EUIA = 3.86) and two Spanish (PP = 1.51; C's = 2.09) aligned parties. The PSC ranks in a middle position on this political axis (PSC = 2.69).

Data for the dependent variables stated in the hypotheses (posting activity or number of posts by parties, number of comments deleted by parties, and followers' engagement) is presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 shows that ICV-EUIA and PSC have a higher posting activity (total posts and posting daily average) than CUP, CiU, C's and PP, while ERC and CiU reach almost the same activity level. Our data also point to a clear difference in posting style between CiU and CUP (99% of posts with a photo in the case of CiU and 47.85% in the case of CUP), and the rest of the parties (which mainly use posts with videos or links or text). And, in terms of deletion of comments our results show that PP has the highest figure (93.29%) followed by CiU (31.4%) and PSC (11.93%).

Table 3. Summary table of the Catalan political parties' posting behavior

Parties	Total Posts	Post/Day	Post+Video or Link/Total (%)	Post+Photo/Total (%)	Comments Deleted by the Party (% Total Comments of Party)
PP	52	1.48	99	1	93.29
CiU	48	1.51	1	99	31.40
ERC	47	1.51	84.70	15.30	5
PSC	71	2.29	92	8	11.93
ICV-EUIA	77	2.48	72	28	4.10
C'S	35	1.2	82.61	17.39	5.3
CUP	54	1.74	52.15	47.85	2.2

Table 4. Features of the behavior of the Catalan parties' Facebook followers' engagement

Parties	Total Comments	Total Likes	Comment Likes	Total Shares	Engagement
PP	923	769	11	121	1,824
CiU	629	6,831	319	2,509	10,287
ERC	531	8,051	366	5,096	14,044
PSC	662	2,094	521	545	3,822
ICV-EUIA	218	3,718	136	5,123	9,195
C'S	1,058	6,813	1,585	2,593	12,049
CUP	1,701	24,194	4,126	9,830	39,851

Lastly, Table 4 presents the interactive features of the posting behaviour of the Facebook followers. This table shows the low level of comments posted by the followers of ICV-EUIA-EUiA (218) and the high level of comments from the followers of C's (1,058) and CUP (1,071). On the total number of likes of the Catalan parties' Facebook posts, CUP (24,194) leads here, followed by ERC (8,051). The last party in this dimension is PP (769). Regarding the followers' likes of the comments posted by other followers, our data shows that CUP (4,126) and C's (1,585) Facebook followers feel more enthusiastic about liking other followers' comments compared with the Facebook followers of the other parties. In terms of sharing the posts, CUP (9,830), ICV-EUIA (5,123) and ERC (5,096) show high levels. And, concerning the total engagement (i.e. the sum of comments, likes and shares), again CUP displays a level markedly different from other parties (39,851), while PP has the lowest engagement (1,824); C's, CiU and ERC could be placed in a middle range, while PSC comes only sixth out of the seven parties (3,822).

Hypotheses Testing

Our analyses corroborate the first hypothesis (H1: Both party posting activity and followers' engagement will be higher for medium-size and small Catalan parties than for big parties and semi-big parties). Figure 2 shows, in this regard, that the smallest party (CUP) stands out in achieving engagement and one medium-size party (ICV-EUiA) and only one semi-big party (PSC) stands out in number of posts. The other semi-big party (ERC) and the biggest party (CiU) are below the mean in terms of number of posts. In addition, Table 5 shows that the Kendall's tau and the Spearman's rho between number of posts and party size are negative, below 4 and non-significant.

The results of our analyses partially corroborate our second hypothesis (H2: The less-institutionalized Catalan parties' posting activity and Facebook followers' engagement will be higher than the posting activity and Facebook followers' engagement of the institutionalized Catalan parties). We have examined the differences in means between the two groups of parties (institutionalized and non-institutionalized parties – see Table 2) and we can only corroborate H2 for the case of the followers' engagement which is much higher in the case of new parties (25,950 comments, likes and shares) than in the case of institutionalized parties (7,834 comments, likes and shares). In contrast, the mean number of posts is lower in the case of new Catalan parties (44.5) than in the case of institutionalized parties (59).

Our data supports the third hypothesis of this study (H3: The Catalan parties' degree of centralization will influence both the control that they exert over their Facebook pages and their Facebook followers' level of engagement, that means, the more centralized the party is, the more comments the party will delete and the less committed their Facebook followers will behave). Figure 3 shows that the most centralized parties, such as PP and CiU, delete more comments, and their

Figure 2. Number of posts and level of engagement by party size

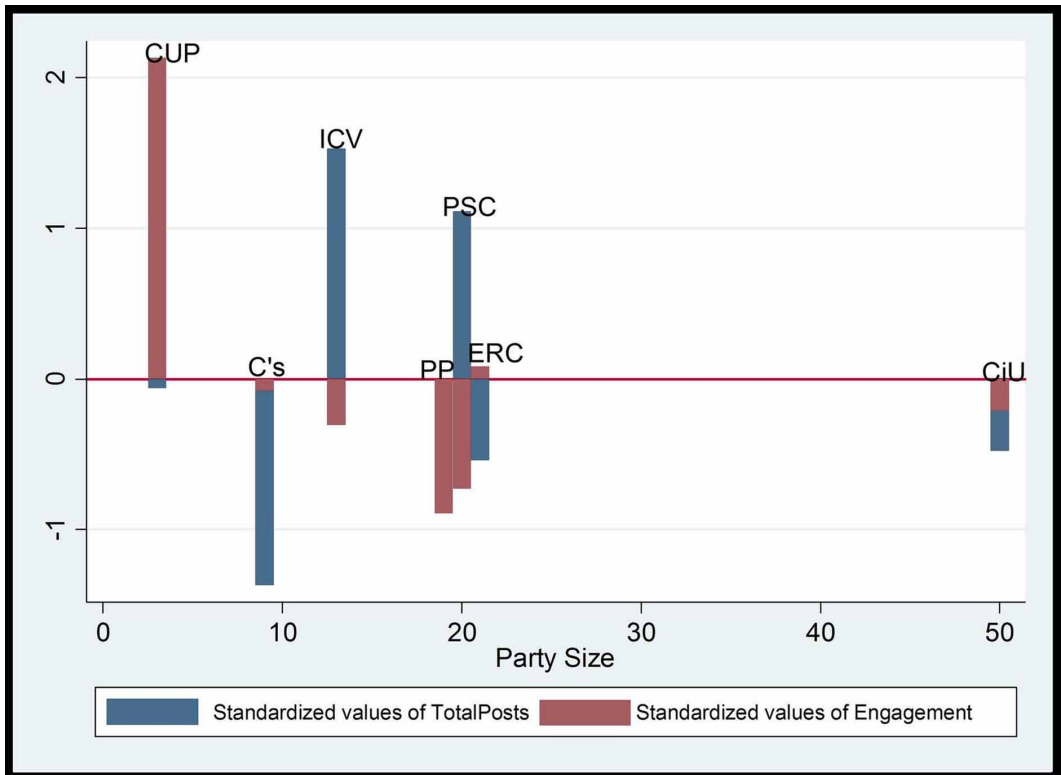


Table 5. Non-parametric coefficients of bivariate associations: Kendall's tau (first row) and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (second row)

	Party Size	Centralisation	Catalan/Spanish	Left-Right
Total posts by party	-0.1429	-0.1905	0.1429	-0.2381
	-0.1786	-0.2703	0.1071	-0.2857
Comments deleted by party	0.4286	0.9524 (**)	0.3333	0.5238
	0.5714	0.9910 (***)	0.4286	0.7500 (*)
Followers' Engagement	-0.2381	-0.5714 (*)	-0.5238	-0.3333
	-0.2857	-0.6667	-0.6429	-0.5000

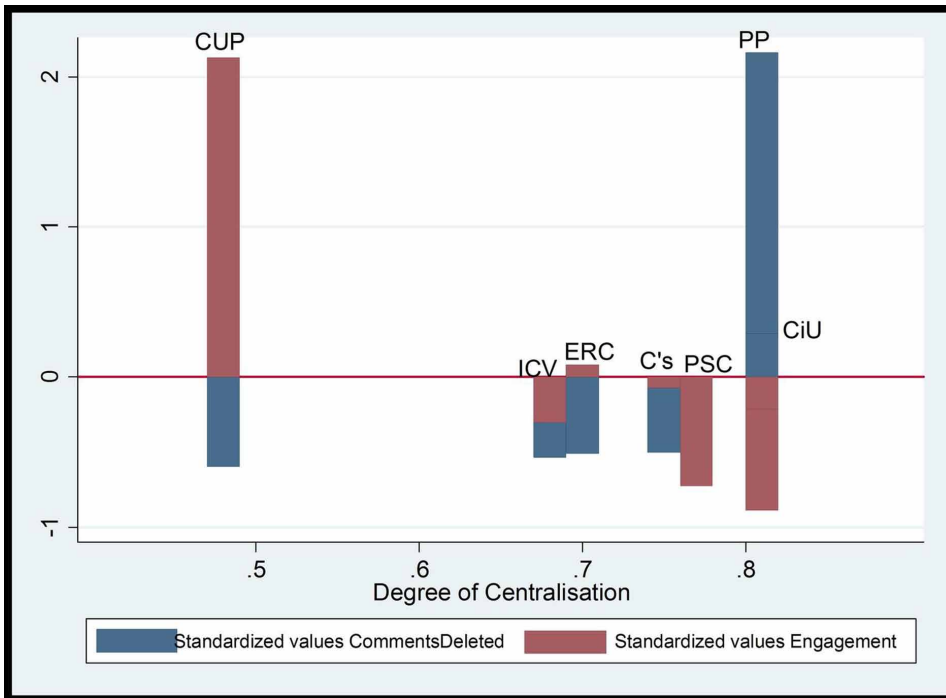
*p<0.10; **p<0.05; ***p<0.001

followers' level of engagement is below the mean. Conversely, the most decentralized party (CUP) has the highest level of engagement and deletes the least comments.

In addition, the bivariate coefficients (Table 5) show a strong and positive association between the parties' level of centralization and comments deleted, over 0.9 and statistically significant for both Kendall's tau and Spearman's rho. And, it also indicates a negative association between centralization and followers' engagement, over 0.5 and significant for the Kendall's tau.

We also wanted to know the relation between parties' ideology (left-right) and their posting behaviour as well as the engagement of their Facebook followers on these posts (H4: Left-wing Catalan parties will have a higher posting activity and more Facebook followers' engagement and

Figure 3. Number of comments deleted and level of engagement by degree of centralisation



will delete fewer comments than right-wing Catalan parties). Our data (Figure 4) shows that left-wing parties stand out in the number of posts initiated by the party whereas right-wing parties post much less and delete more comments. In terms of engagement, two left-wing parties – CUP and ERC – are clearly above the mean.

The measures of association between the left-right positioning and percentage of comments deleted are positive, above 0.4 and the Spearman's rho is significant, demonstrating that the more right-wing a party is, the more comments it will delete (see Table 5). Furthermore, the bivariate association with the level of engagement (negative, and the Spearman's rho is over 0.5) allows us to conclude that the more left-wing a party is the more engagement it will have from its followers.

In terms of the fifth hypothesis (H5: Catalan-nationalist parties will have a higher posting activity and more Facebook followers' engagement and will delete fewer comments than non-Catalan-nationalist parties), Figure 5 indicates a mixed picture. The Catalan-nationalist parties (ERC, CUP) stand out in level of engagement, but less-Catalan-nationalist parties are prominent in number of posts (ICV-EUiA, PSC). With relation to the comments deleted, the most non-Catalan-nationalist party – PP – deletes the highest number of comments from the followers, but an important Catalan-nationalist party – CiU – ranks in second position in this regard.

The bivariate coefficients (see Table 5) are over 0.4 for the comments deleted and the followers' engagement, but the relationship is very weak in the case of the number of posts initiated by the party. The sign of the coefficients indicates that the non-Catalan-nationalist parties delete more comments, but get much less engagement from their followers.

We have also checked the relationship between the number of posts initiated by the party and the engagement level of the Facebook followers. We wanted to ascertain if the number of updates and news posted by the parties could give rise to more comments, likes and shares by the followers. But this relationship is not proved since the coefficients of association are low and not significant (Kendall's tau = -0.2381; Spearman's rho = -0.3929; Pearson's r = -0.18). Studies from other countries

Figure 4. Number of posts, comments deleted and level of engagement by left-right ideology cleavage

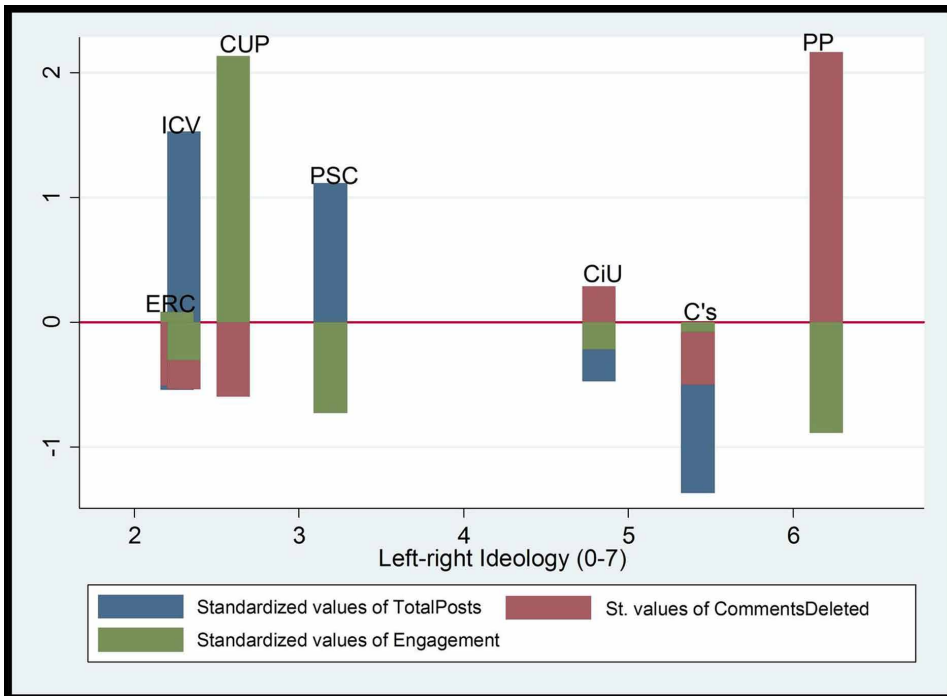
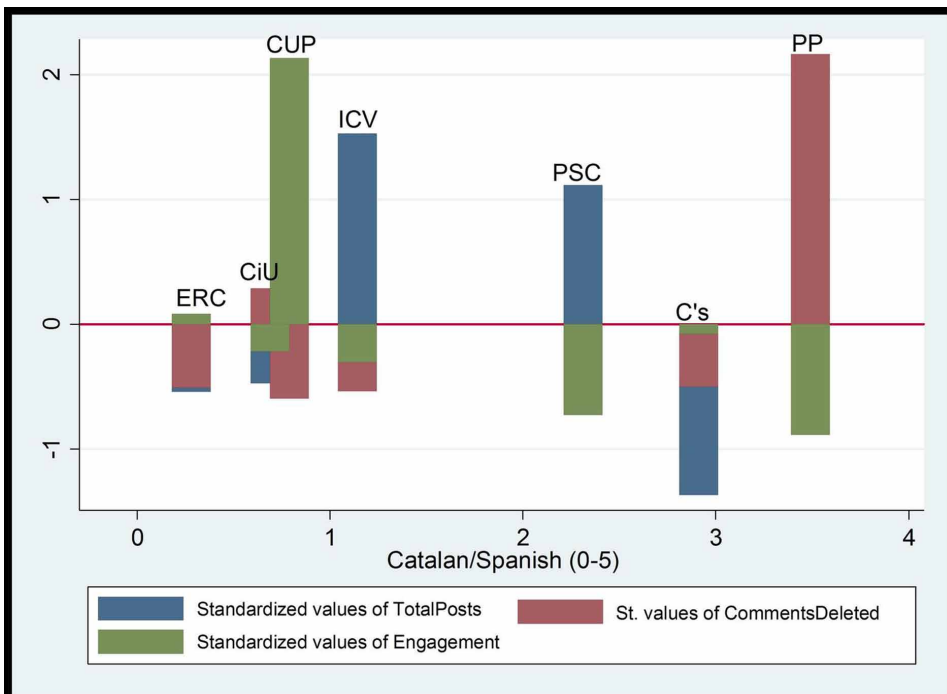


Figure 5. Number of posts, comments deleted and level of engagement by positioning in the Catalan/Spanish cleavage



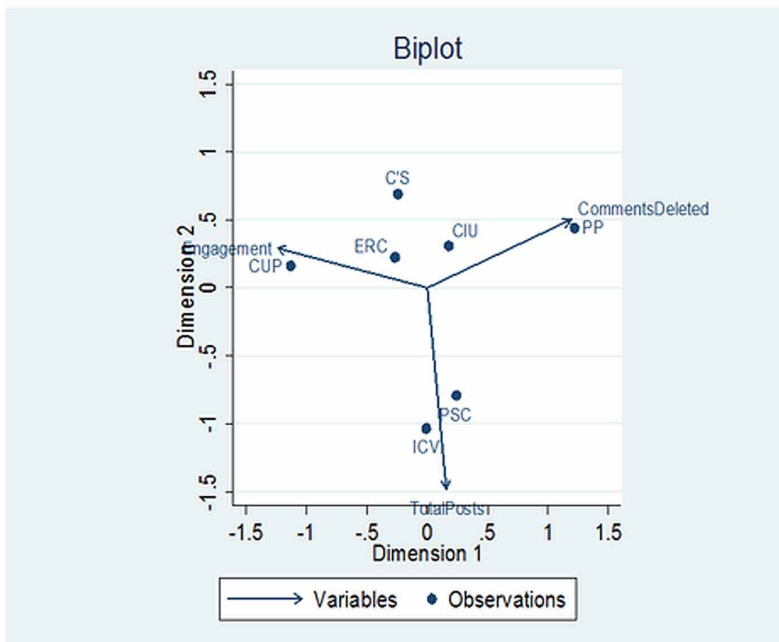
show the same results (Klinger, 2013, p. 729); it seems that posting more does not necessarily imply more response from the followers. We should consider that the party with more posting activity – PSC – has the lowest level of engagement. Thus, followers do not necessarily interact and response more if parties update and post more.

Summarizing, three hypotheses are fully confirmed and two are partially corroborated. In Figure 6 we graphically show these results using a biplot displaying a two-dimensional plot of the parties and their relative positions on the three dependent variables (number of posts, number of comments deleted, level of engagement) represented in arrows.

As we can see, CUP and ERC load mainly in the ‘Engagement’ variable, PP and CiU in the ‘CommentsDeleted’ variable and ICV-EUIA and PSC in the ‘TotalPost’ dimension. Ciutadans (C’s) appears in an equidistant location with respect to other parties, but closer to the engagement variable where CUP and ERC load heavily because C’s is the third Catalan party in level of engagement.

Nevertheless, as we have mentioned in the previous studies section, alternative variables might also be important in determining the level of followers’ engagement. For instance, the different marketing strategies of parties might increase the engagement in their Facebook pages (Kalsnes, 2016). Data in Table 3 show that parties differ in their posting style: CiU and CUP mainly use posts with photos while the rest use more videos or links. Hence, we have checked if posting style has an influence over the level of engagement by conducting an analysis of variance. And this analysis concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the four types of posts – link, text, photo and video – ($F(3.81) = 122,579, p = 0.000$). Furthermore, the tests revealed that the difference between posts with photos and posts with video are not as large as the difference between all the other types of posts⁵. These results suggest that visual posts (posts with photos and videos) achieve higher engagement than posts with links or text. The highest difference was observed between the posts with photos and the posts with only text.

Figure 6. Party position in the three main traits of parties’ Facebook pages



DISCUSSION

This research has discovered that parties' characteristics have an influence over their posting behaviour on Facebook and their followers' reactions to these posts. When analysing parties' behaviour in Web 2.0, party organization still matters.

The first hypothesis has been accepted since small parties such as CUP and C's have more engaged and committed Facebook followers, although a semi-big party such as ERC shows a very high level of engagement as well. And, PSC (semi-big party) and ICV-EUiA (medium-size party) are the parties with the highest number of posts. The second hypothesis is only corroborated for the case of the followers' activity since the less institutionalized parties (CUP and C's) are among the most active (comments, likes and shares) in terms of Facebook followers, but two institutionalized parties (PSC and ICV-EUiA) have more posting activity than the new parties.

The testing of these two hypotheses demonstrates that in the Catalan case small, medium-size and new parties are taking advantage of social media because they get greater engagement than bigger parties. Also a medium-size party (ICV-EUiA) stands out in the number of posts displayed. Although these smaller and newer parties do not have the human and material resources of the more consolidated and bigger parties, they are surpassing the more established parties since social media are not so costly and difficult to dominate as traditional media. These results are in line with those found by Vaccari (2013), Larsson (2014) and Kalsnes (2016) in such diverse countries as Italy, France, Sweden and Norway. Therefore, we can state that Catalonia is an example of how the online environment can favour minor (CUP, C's), medium-size (ICV-EUiA) or semi-big (ERC) and less-institutionalized parties (CUP, C's). The majority of the voters of these parties obtain political information from the Internet and more than 20% from Facebook and Twitter (see Table 1). As other studies have shown (Balcells & Cardenal, 2013), the Internet might be levelling the electoral competition in Catalonia offering fringe parties a new media alternative for visibility and information dissemination.

Furthermore, the most relevant explanatory variable of the analysis is parties' degree of centralization. Centralized parties such as PP or semi-centralized parties such as the PSC rank lower in engagement than decentralized parties such as CUP and ICV-EUiA. Also, the highly-centralized parties – PP and CiU – delete many more comments than the rest. Therefore, the confirmation of the third hypothesis implies that the party organization still matters even in times of social media. Similar to what Wall & Sudulich (2010) and Padró-Solanet & Cardenal (2008) discovered for the parties' websites, centralization of decisions, high levels of institutionalization and a large size do not mean that parties are deploying more participatory or interactive online channels, regardless of the resources available to these kinds of parties.

In addition, our research shows that the cleavages pervading the Catalan party system play a role in explaining parties' behaviour on Web 2.0. The results confirming fully the fourth hypothesis and partially the fifth hypothesis demonstrate that there are important differences in posting behaviour and level of engagement by the cleavage axes. Left-wing parties initiated more posts, get more engagement from their followers and delete fewer comments than their right-wing counterparts. Also, Catalan-nationalist parties get much more engagement than the non-Catalan-nationalists (with the exception of C's), but post and delete fewer comments (with the exception of CiU). In general, Catalan identified parties and left wing parties give rise to more engagement than the rest. As previous studies have found, parties' ideological positions have an influence on their online interaction (Vergeer et al, 2011; Vaccari, 2013). Left-wing parties usually defend more participatory ideals that lead them to develop interactive channels with the citizens, and their followers might be more accustomed to have their say (Ibidem). In the current Catalan political scenario dominated by claims for independence, Catalan-nationalist parties can also find more commitment and involvement from the citizens in their Facebook pages (Bartomeus & Medina, 2010).

Lastly, we have tried to test an alternative explanation to the influence of parties' characteristics in the level of followers' engagement. We have considered that parties' communication strategies

related to the type of post to be displayed could have an impact. Our results are in line with those previously found by Kalsnes (2016) in Norway and show that visual posts (posts with videos or photos) trigger more engagement than parties' posts with links or only text. Precisely, CiU and CUP, which enjoy high levels of followers' engagement, are intensively using photos and videos in their posts.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Catalan parties' characteristics, their posting behaviour and the reactions of the followers to the parties' posts are related. Parties show a diversity of posting activity on Facebook and their followers interact and participate differently.

In the Catalan political context, Facebook followers of the small and new parties (for instance, CUP or C's) show a greater engagement with parties' Facebook posts than those of the big and institutionalized parties. Furthermore, highly centralized parties (for example, PP or CiU) exert more control over the content of their Facebook pages (by means of deletion of followers' comments) and rank lower in engagement than less centralized and less institutionalized parties (such as CUP). Our research also shows the influence of the cleavages of the Catalan party system over the engagement of parties' Facebook followers. Left-wing parties and Catalan-nationalist parties get more engagement from their Facebook followers than right-wing parties and non-Catalan-nationalist parties.

This study is a new addition to the understanding of how parties' characteristics are affecting party use of social media and the responses of their possible sympathizers and voters. Most of the results are similar to what currently happens in other countries demonstrating that social media have an equalization effect since minor, decentralized and new parties are achieving more participation than bigger and institutionalized parties.

But could we apply our conclusions and research to other cases? Even if Catalonia is witnessing a very specific political climate, parties' main characteristics and Facebook interaction features are comparable across countries. Moreover, the methods and the open software used in this research are prone to be replicated in other studies.

Nevertheless, several complementary hypotheses remain to be tested. First, it is reasonable to assume that other political parties' characteristics play a role in explaining parties' Facebook behaviour. For instance, a more in-depth analysis of the party's primary goals and the corresponding online communication strategy (Römmele, 2003) should be conducted. Also, it is relevant to consider the perception and decisions of party leaders with regard to the role to be played by social networking sites (Lynch & Hogan, 2012) in the parties' communication strategy and the organization of parties' social media departments (which may be studied by doing in-depth interviews – Kalsnes, 2016). Furthermore, it might be useful for explanatory purposes to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the parties' Facebook followers (by using online surveys) since these characteristics could explain part of the differences in participation in parties' Facebook pages. Lastly, more studies overcoming the limited time span of our article and doing comparative analysis between parties of different and similar political systems could add powerful insights into the way in which parties deal with social media.

In summary, considering the broader debate on cyberpolitics this research shows that parties' characteristics are affecting Facebook followers' reactions to parties' posts. In the present 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2013), party organization still matters.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Social media are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share connections, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 2).
- ² (a) Big parties: more than 30 seats in the Catalan Parliament; (b) Semi-big parties: 20 to 30 seats; (c) Medium parties: 10 to 20 seats; (d) Small parties: 1 to 10 seats.
- ³ The party's ideology is measured using the positioning given by the respondents of the CEO survey of 20 June, 2013. See Figure 1 to check the joint position of the Catalan parties on the two ideological cleavages.
- ⁴ We will measure the institutionalization of the parties with a dummy variable: 1. Institutionalized parties: parties that have been around for 15 years or more; 2. New parties: parties less than 15 years old.
- ⁵ The Tukey and Games-Howell post-hoc tests showed that the posts with photos ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.68$), with videos ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.63$), with links ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 0.61$) and with text ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.95$) were significantly different between them. However, the difference between posts with photos and the posts with video was less significant ($p = 0.011$) than the difference between all the other types of posts ($p = 0.000$).

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