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El papel de la agenda mediática en un contexto de polarización política

The Role of the Media Agenda in a Context of Political Polarization

RESUMEN: Este artículo estudia el papel de la agenda de los medios en el contexto de polarización política que ha predominado en España durante la década pasada. A partir de una primera hipótesis acerca de la relación entre la polarización política y el votante mediano, el artículo se centra no sólo en la capacidad de los medios para imponer y manejar una agenda temática específica, obsesivamente concentrada en el terrorismo, sino también para hacer responsable al gobierno por ello, tal como se desprende del encuadre dominante del terrorismo: "debilidad y concesión".

Palabras clave: polarización, sistema de medios, establecimiento de la agenda, encuadre, atribución de responsabilidad.

ABSTRACT: This article addresses the role of the media agenda in the context of political polarization that has predominated in Spain over the last decade. Starting from a first hypothesis regarding the relationship between political polarization and the median voter, the article focuses not only on the ability of the media to impose and manage a specific thematic agenda, obsessively concentrated on terrorism, but also to make the government responsible for the subjects on the agenda, as can be seen from the dominant framing of terrorism:"weakness and concession".

Key words: Polarization, Media system, Agenda setting, Framing, Attribution of responsibility.

1. The context: political polarization and loss of responsiveness to the median voter[1]

In contrast to the conventional assumption that political parties compete for the median voter, this article is based on the hypothesis that, in recent times, parties have tended to forget this voter and have competed to satisfy interests that are increasingly distant from those of the median voter. This hypothesis has been widely documented by Jacobs and Shapiro (2000), who study the polarization strategies that have dominated in the US since the eighties. In the Spanish case, the polarization is inexplicable unless we take into account the influence of the media system as a factor of polarization and, more specifically, the peculiarities of the system known as "polarized pluralism" (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In fact, the first phase of political polarization, at the end of the Felipe González socialist period, occurred at a moment of maximum media polarization, due to the liberalization of the television media and the resulting struggle to form and control the new media holdings (González 2008). Thus, today's political-media alignments were shaped largely in the early nineties, and they served as a breeding ground for Aznar's political polarization. In this case, the political-media strategy was easy to understand: while the PP devoted itself to harassing Felipe González, the parallel media devoted themselves to exploiting the socialist scandals, thus undermining the government and providing a paradigmatic example of what Castells has called "the politics of scandal" (Castells 2009).

More intriguing is the second phase of polarization, which began during the second PP term, shortly after this party won the absolute majority in the 2000 elections. Aznar's decision is the best example of our original hypothesis: far from competing for the median voter, the parties give preference to their core constituencies, despite the election risk that this involves. More specifically, what this example suggests is that the parties are responsive to the demands of the median voter while they are trying to get their vote, but they become radical once they are in power. Would it not be more reasonable for them to continue to be responsive in order not to lose the median voters' support, according to the conventional assumption about party

competition? The problem is that both US and Spanish experience have recurrently shown not only the parties' lack of responsiveness but that this lack of responsiveness occurs despite severe election defeats, indicating that punishment in the elections does not seem to be enough to mend their lack of political responsiveness to the median voter.

How can we explain this choice in favor of polarization? There are several reasons that polarization is a rational option for the parties, if we understand it as a strategy oriented toward reducing the center of the electoral spectrum by encouraging its potential inhabitants to abandon it and go over to one of the sides in the conflict.

• The first reason is that polarization increases the feeling of insecurity in less ideological and more moderate voters, making it easier to close ranks around two ideological bands that become the trenches (Corrales 2005)[2].

• The second reason is that polarization induces symmetrical responses from the political adversary that generate a spiral of threats and uncertainties, reinforcing the previous mechanism (Ibid.).

• The third reason is that people bail out from the ideological space of the center, because they abandon the political game and therefore take refuge in abstention (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). Turning politics into an agonistic task that exhausts itself but does not provide any improvement in coexistence or problem solving induces feelings of rejection, and even of cynicism ("they are all the same"), discouraging the political participation of the moderates.

This explains how the PP was able to compete with the PSOE, even though its position in the ideological spectrum was worse that the PSOE's position, as can be gathered from the evolution of the median voter's self-placement and placement of the parties throughout recent terms. In March 1996, shortly after the general elections, the median voter placed herself at 4.7 on the conventional left-right scale, very close to the PSOE which, despite having lost the elections, still held a privileged position from this point of view (4.5). In contrast, the median voter remained very far from the PP, which he placed over three points away. Four years later, shortly before the PP won the absolute majority, the median voter placed herself two tenths further to the right, moving half a point away from the PSOE and that much toward the PP, which she then placed at 7.6. After the March 2004 elections, the median voter leaned toward the center-left (4.8) again, moving away

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[2] In the end, polarization aspires to replace the distribution of preferences, which is typically a normal distribution around a more or less central midpoint, with a bimodal distribution.

from the PP once again (7.8) and toward the PSOE (see Table 1). Despite the repeated attempts to "travel toward the center," it did not seem like a very good idea for the PP to dispute the elections on ideological grounds based on these data. Thus, they resorted to polarization.

However, this does not mean that the polarization strategy that the PP has followed recently is a guarantee of success in the elections. In fact, the experience of the 2004 and 2008 elections, which ended with a socialist victory, suggests, rather, that this strategy turns against their election interests. In this case, why do they persist in using this strategy? A careful study of the 2008 elections suggests that the socialist victory occurred at the expense of a certain ideological movement of the PSOE; even though it is true that the PSOE increased its representation, this was compatible with a similar increase for the PP, which suggests that Zapatero gained votes for the left at the expense of the center (González and Bouza 2009: 173 ff). From this point of view, the election results are ambivalent, considering that, as long as the PSOE continues to win more votes, it will be obtaining them, according to this explanation, from a position farther to the left. This indicates that the polarization strategy has two kinds of effects:

• On one hand, it works against the PP because it contributes to mobilize the left instead of reducing participation in the elections, which would be its goal[3].

• While, on the other, it manages to move the PSOE away from the center, weakening the PSOE's strategic power.

According to this explanation, polarization has a double consequence: on one hand, the dynamic of polarization turns against those who promote it (the PP) because, far from inhibiting participation in the elections (which was its purpose), it stimulates it. In fact, participation was 75%, the highest in all the continuity elections held in Spain: 1979, 1986, 1989, and 2000. The second consequence is that this very same dynamic of polarization has helped to move the PSOE away from the center on the ideological axis. Ac-

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[3] We should recall the declarations of the PP election strategist to the *Financial Times* on the eve of the elections: "Elorriaga states that the PP is attempting to incite the socialist voters to abstain", *El País* Feb. 29, 2008. "Our whole strategy is based on the undecided socialist voters", he stated, in an interview with the British newspaper *Financial Times*. "We know that (the undecided socialist voters) will never vote for us. But if we can sow enough doubt about the economy, about immigration, and about nationalist issues, then maybe they will stay home", the politican added. On the other hand, we should keep in mind the studies that relate the increase in political tension to the increase in participation in the elections, a relation in which media negativity plays an important role (Martin 2008).

cording to the CIS series, the PSOE has been moving toward the left since 1996, with a total movement of five tenths, most of which has happened in the last term (three tenths). If we consider that the median voter has remained relatively stable during this time (except in the 2000 elections, when he moved three tenths of a point toward the center), the result is that the distance between the PSOE and the median voter has risen from two tenths, in 1996, to eight tenths in 2008.

Table 1. Self-placement and placement of the PP, PSOE, and IU on the ideological scale (averages)

	March 96	**Feb. 00**	**March 04***	**March 08***
Median voter	4.7	5.0	4.8	4.8
PP	7.9	7.6	7.8	7.8
PSOE	4.5	4.3	4.3	4.0
IU	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.4

Source: CIS studies 2210 (post-election 1996), 2382 (pre-election 2000), 2559 (post-election 2004) and 2750 (pre-election). *The 2004 and 2008 surveys were weighted for vote recall[4].

2. Hypothesis and methodology

From the communication point of view, this first socialist term was very different from the first *popular* (PP) term. While the first Aznar government managed to impose a line of communication ("Spain's doing well") in which the economic prosperity influenced the perception of the political situation positively (González 2002; Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2010), what we observed in this term was, rather, the contrary: a negative influence of politics on the perception of prosperity, as a result of a dynamic of political confrontation that began with the PP's resistance to accepting its election defeat in March 2004 and with the media frenzy that followed the March 11 terrorist attacks before those elections. One of the results of this dynamic of polarization is that, contrary to what happened in Aznar's first term, when the political situation was perceived through the lens of economic prosperity, the perception of prosperity in this last term was contaminated by political tension (Fundación

[4] The reason that the sample was weighted for vote recall is that, since the 2004 elections, the surveys have been affected by a problem of infra-representation of PP voters (Balaguer 2010).

Alternativas 2007 and 2008; Maravall 2008). In this sense, the PSOE has missed a historical opportunity to profit from its economic management by challenging the PP's superior competence on these grounds.

We should, at this point, remember that, given the characteristic pattern of public opinion in the Spanish case, the audience is accustomed to the ritual countering of proclamations and accusations that appeal less to their capacity for rational evaluation than to their affective and ideological identification with one of the sides in the contest. Rational argumentation and the debate of ideas has been replaced by a trench journalism whose aggressiveness is only comparable to its laxness and permissiveness, given its lack of commitment to even the most elementary rules of impartial information and journalistic professionalism (remember the way the director of the *ABC*, José Antonio Zarzalejos, was fired one month before the elections for refusing to participate in the so-called "conspiration theory"; Zarzalejos 2010). As a result, the media polarization that characterizes the Spanish case moved farther and farther away from a commitment to inform and from the function of *opinion formation* within its audience and was finally eclipsed by the exclusive imperative of *taking sides* (Díaz Nosty 2005).

As we will see shortly, the climate of public opinion reached its most dramatic moment during the pre-campaign for the municipal and autonomous community elections in 2007, when the media agenda became overwhelmingly dominated by the terrorist issue, with the resulting displacement and marginalization of the rest of government performance. Before the general election, the media agendas became diversified with new issues: the Catholic Church-government conflict, the -then suspected- economic crisis, and immigration, but this did not, according to the CIS post-election study, prevent terrorism from being "the issue debated the most by the parties and the candidates throughout the campaign", as we will see.

Based on these observations, the article focuses on discussing the conventional assumption of communications studies that the influence of the media comes not only from their capacity to impose a certain thematic agenda but also from their capacity to facilitate the attribution of responsibility according to which the voters evaluate the government's performance. This assumption has, therefore, two components: first, the media select a repertoire of issues in order to suggest a certain reading of the current political situation to the voters (McCombs 2004). During an election campaign, this repertoire is, besides, the thematic path along which the voters must circulate before reaching a voting decision. Independently of whether the issues are framed in one way or another and that certain interpretations of this current situation come from that, the thematic agenda is never innocent, insofar as the

selection of issues can lead to different conclusions. From this perspective, the critical point in an election campaign is the degree of identification or fit between the media agendas and the citizens' agendas, so that the media's first objective is for their audiences to interiorize their thematic proposal and make it their own. However, it is not only a matter of the media managing to convey this set of issues to the audience, but also of whether this goes along with attributing responsibility for these issues to the government, and whether the audience accepts this attribution or not (Iyengar 1991).

We must also consider that the process of creating the thematic agenda (*thematization*) tends to replace ideology and party programs as a factor of political alignment (Badia 1992: 171 ff). In this sense, the thematic leading role of terrorism in the framework of the polarization strategies implemented by the Popular Party (Sampedro and Sánchez Duarte 2008; Sampedro and Seoane 2008) did nothing more than take this process to its logical limits, thus illustrating a communication pattern that tends to substitute *positional* issues –the issues that mark an ideological position, namely social and economic policies– with ideologically *transversal* subjects such as terrorism (Maravall 2008).

As for methodology, we based our work on an panel study with focus groups of Madrid voters that met every six months throughout the last term (specifically, from Spring 2006 to the 2008 elections), selected for being center voters: position 5 in the ideological scale. Given the growing importance of the media in the process of voting decisions, we followed the media agenda as we studied these voters' behavior, so that each of the four waves of this study was preceded by a study of the reference press during approximately two months, in order to gather the most significant phenomena of the selection and framing of information. Because the study is limited to Madrid, we followed the three most representative titles of the Madrid press: *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*, which provide the basic frames of perception and evaluation of the political situation. Once the main subjects of the agenda established by these media were identified, we went on to formulate their respective frames, each of which was made up of two elements: diagnosis of the problem and attribution of responsibility (Entman 1993, Kinder and Nelson 2005, Schnell and Callaghan 2005).

Given the class position of our focus groups' members (working class), their exposition to the media and, especially, to the press is limited, but they are not uninfluenced by them. It is true that the Spanish press, as occurs in Mediterranean countries in general, has a limited impact in terms of readers, outside of the middle classes, but today's multimedia groups incorporate a variety of resources (radio, TV, internet) capable of expanding the news

and opinions coming from the press all over the country. We assume, from this perspective, that there is a continuous flux of frames that comes from the press of reference and spreads across radio and TV, which serve as loudspeakers for the press. Once the agenda and the frames are identified, we must study how our panel groups work with the information coming from the media, integrating it into their own personal experience and their cultural pattern, which amounts studying the *interdependence* between the media and the public (Entman 1989).

The methodology employed requires some clarification. The most common way of using group dynamics for psycho-sociological purposes is to convoke a series of individuals from a similar social background who meet a single time, so that the individuals recognize one another as members of a group due to their shared sociodemographic and sociolinguistic characteristics, but without any primary elements that condition their feeling of belonging to the group. In our case, the working of the panel groups involves two issues:

• The first issue is that the panel groups facilitate the study not only of the voting decision as such, but of the decision-making process as a whole, from a non-election moment (the middle of the term, when the elections are not yet in sight) to the post-election moment, right through the climax of the process: the pre-electoral or decision moment.

• The second issue is that, even though the election decision is individual, the decision process is not necessarily individual; it is, rather, the result of interaction in the family, at work, etc. That is, it is the result of small-group interaction processes regarding which the panel study is a simulation.

The second clarification is related to group dynamics and how they vary throughout the research process. To start with, the study focused on the main factors that nourish these voters' discourse on politics: media messages, personal experience, and popular wisdom (Gamson 1992). In the initial phase, the first waves of the study, corresponding to non-election periods, follow a deliberately non-directive dynamic so that the groups will establish their own thematic agenda spontaneously, allowing us to compare and contrast it with the media agenda, as gathered from the front pages of the reference press. Studies on the influence of the media suggest that the relationship between media and audiences is the result of a diverse and complex interaction (Curran 2005; Callejo 1995), which suggests that it would be a good idea to inquire into the way our groups adopt certain elements of media discourse in their personal experience, highlighting the elements that are congruent with their experience and omitting or rejecting those that are not. When the moment of the election arrives, group dynamics become more directive: the moderator begins to ask about the voting decision right before the elections

and then asks the group members to justify this decision, in order to classify the voters and extract a typology of votes (rational, ideological…).

Moreover, one of the tasks assigned to the panel groups relies on the evaluation of the frames taken from the media and, particularly, of their two main ingredients: diagnosis and attribution of responsibility. Once the frames have been evaluated and we understand the functioning of the attribution of responsibility regarding each of the issues, we will estimate the influence of each issue on the voting decision with the support of the CIS panel survey concerning the 2008 elections. In order to do that, the pre-electoral wave of this survey provides us with the evaluation of government's performance on each of the issues. How much does the electorate's evaluation of each of these issues influence the decision whether to vote for the PSOE or for the PP? We will try to answer this question twice: first we will take as reference all the voters and then we will repeat the same model just for the center voters. Given that the later are less influenced by ideology, we expect the influence of the issues to be higher among them.

3. The evolution of the media agenda and its electoral implications

It's important to keep in mind that, after the attack on Barajas airport (December 2006), the media agenda concentrated obsessively on the negotiation with ETA and its ramifications, so that during the three months before the municipal and autonomous community elections of May 2007, government action was practically taken right off the public agenda. We referred to a sample of nearly two hundred headlines and editorials in the reference press corresponding to the current national political situation during this period and found that 44 were devoted to ANV (the ETA election brand), 35 to terrorism, 23 to 11-M, 13 to city planning corruption, and only 22 to the campaign issues themselves. With these precedents, it was not happenstance that terrorism became the second most important problem, after unemployment and ahead of immigration, on the agenda of national problems, according to the CIS series

We should pause for a moment to think about the genesis of this process, and to do this we will use the press study carried out during the first waves of our own study which, as we mentioned, focused on the Madrid reference press: *ABC*, *El Mundo* and *El País*. The Spring of 2006 (the first wave of our study) was dominated, in terms of public opinion, by ETA's declaration of a truce and the resulting initiation of conversations between this organization and the government, which allowed the press that was sympathetic to the government, represented by *El País*, to frame these conversations as a "peace

process". In the fall of this same year (the second wave of the study), however, two critical events occurred: on one hand, the arms robbery in France that cast doubt on the aforementioned "peace process", and at the same time the crisis of the cayuco fishing boats which cast doubt on the issue of the liberal framing of the regularization process for immigrants ("papers for everyone"). This all led *El País* to a true framing crisis or *misframing*[5]. To the contrary, this critical juncture in Fall 2006 facilitated the work of *ABC* and *El Mundo*, who took over the terrorist issue in order to frame government action in terms of "concession and weakness", or even of capitulation to ETA. The Barajas attack in December of this same year contributed to feed this frame and to keep it active until the 2007 municipal elections.

When general elections came closer, the media agenda diversified, incorporating new issues such as the conflict between the government and the Catholic Church, the incipient economic crisis, and immigration. For the government, the easiest issue to handle was the first one, which was why the Popular Party managed to get it off the agenda and deactivate it. Regarding the second issue, voters proved to be quite sensitive faced with the worsening economic situation, yet they did not make the government responsible for it, given the global character of the crisis at the beginning. Finally, the Popular Party brought immigration, an issue that had been taboo before, into the campaign, but the PP proved unable to formulate the problem and take advantage of voters' high sensitivity to this issue[6]. Nevertheless, we must remember that, according to the CIS post-election survey, terrorism was the most frequently "discussed issue by parties and candidates during the campaign." That at least is how 28% of the people interviewed recalled it, compared to 22.4% who recalled "economic problems" and 7.4% who recalled "immigration" as the issues discussed the most. This memory from the campaign matches the media agenda well enough, with terrorism reaching first

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[5] The idea of *misframing* comes from Goffman's (1975 [2006]) classic study and refers to the rupture of the *frame* when the actors involved realize that it leads to deception and discredit (*Ibídem.* 313 ff). In the case we are studying, we can observe various symptoms of *misframing*. With reference to immigration, we can find some symptoms through the simple process of contrasting the printed and digital versions of this same newspaper (*El País*). These contradictions were accompanied by editorials with the titles "Change in immigration" (September 12, 2006), "Change in discourse" (September 17, 2006), etc. With reference to the "peace process," under doubt because of the cited arms robbery, it led *El País* to repeatedly urge some kind of response from the government, in editorials titled "No dialogue with guns" (October 25, 2006), "Need to be specific" (October 26, 2006), etc.

[6] "56% support obliging immigrants to 'respect Spanish customs'", according to the *El País* Sunday headline (February 10, 2008).

place among the campaign issues, as can be inferred from a study of the front pages and editorials published during the three months prior to the elections (see table 2).

Table 2. Thematic media agenda: Headlines and editorials (from Jan. 1, 2008 to March 9, 2008)

	EL PAÍS	EL MUNDO	ABC	Total
N (%)				
Terrorism, ETA, ANV	23	36	11	70 (20.8%)
Economy, crisis	14	13	18	45 (13.4%)
Tax relief	4	4	5	13 (3.9%)
Immigration	9	4	3	16 (4.8%)
Church-government conflict	13	2	16	31 (9.2%)
Lack of safety	1	2	6	9 (2.7%)
Electoral debates	13	15	6	34 (10.1%)
Polls	3	11	7	21 (6.3%)
Campaign	18	19	18	55 (16.3%)
Other	20	11	11	42 (12.5%)
TOTAL	118	117	101	336

Source: prepared by authors.

In order to explain what happened in the center of the ideological spectrum, we will proceed in two timeframes: we will begin by presenting some of the results obtained from our own research that allow us to formulate a hypothesis about the way attribution of responsibility worked in the last elections. Then, we will empirically test the hypothesis with the help of the CIS panel study. With regard to the first, we must keep in mind, for now, the contrast between our groups' agendas and the media agendas, because, just as the agenda expressed spontaneously by our groups proposed one main issue, immigration[7], the media agenda, in contrast, proposed another very different priority, terrorism[8]. On this point, our study gave the groups the opportunity

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[7] We must remember that it is a group made up of workers from the Madrid metropolitan area.
[8] Other studies have reached similar conclusions: Pujol 2008.

to pronounce themselves regarding the dominant frames of both issues. As the reader will recall, each frame has two components, the diagnosis of the problem and attribution of responsibility, so that the groups had to choose which of the diagnoses and which formula of attribution of responsibility were closer to their own views. In the case of immigration, the frame was made up of the following two pairs of statements:

Diagnosis:

a) "immigration is good for the economy but is a risk for social coexistence and the proper functioning of social services"

b) "immigration is not just good for the economy, but also because it makes Spain an open and more tolerant country"

Attribution of responsibility:

a) "the problem of immigration is a consequence of how government regulates this issue"

b) "the problem of immigration is a global problem that no single country can solve by itself"

In the case of terrorism, the components of the frame were:

Diagnosis:

a) "the 'peace process' is an opportunity for ETA to grow stronger"

b) "it is an opportunity for peace in the Basque Country"

Attribution of responsibility:

a) "the PP's use of terrorism is an obstacle to ending violence in the Basque Country"

b) "the problem for putting an end to ETA is the government's weakness and Zapatero's concessions"

The result of this first test was rather paradoxical because, in the case of immigration, a negative diagnosis of the problem (throughout the panel study, the groups leaned toward the idea of immigration as "a risk for coexistence") was at no time accompanied by attribution of responsibility to the government, while in the case of terrorism, an initial diagnosis favorably influenced by ETA's truce and the expectation of a "peace process" ended up by attributing responsibility to the government for carrying negotiations with ETA too far. In the first case, the non-attribution of responsibility was coherent with the idea that immigration is a "global problem". In the second one, the attribution of responsibility was due to the dominant framing among the media ("weakness and concessions"), a frame of blame from the adversary press.

In order to test our hypothesis empirically, let us again recall that, according to the CIS post-electoral survey, the most frequently discussed issues

during the campaign were terrorism (28.1% of the answers), economic pro-
blems (22.4%), and immigration (7.4%). Moreover, the pre-electoral wave
of this panel survey included a question about how the government's per-
formance was evaluated on each of these issues. Therefore, the question to
be answered may be formulated as follows: how much does the electorate's
evaluation of each of these issues influence the decision whether to vote for
the PSOE or for the PP? Given that our own study refers to center voters, we
will first present data referring to all voters, and then data referring to those
voters who place themselves at the very center of the left-right scale (posi-
tion 5). As these center voters are those who are least influenced by ideology,
we expect their voting to be more influenced by these issues.

In order to answer this question, we provide the results from a logistic
regression model to estimate the effect of each of the issues after controlling
for social class[9], education, and ideological distance[10]. The issues come from
a pre-electoral question concerning how the government's performance is
evaluated on different subjects, on a five-point scale ranging from very good
(1) to very bad (5). Table 3 shows the regression coefficients referring to each
of the issues, and the changes in predicted probabilities between the extreme
values of the scales.

In short, the interpretation of the outcome is as follows: after controlling
for social class, education and ideological distance, the highest coefficients
correspond to terrorism, terrorism being the issue that influenced voting pro-
babilities the most (37% among all voters, 42% among center voters). In
both cases, terrorism had a greater influence than immigration, and even
greater than the economy, a difference that we can explain in terms of diffe-
rent levels and formulas of attribution of responsibility because, just as the
government benefitted from a rather exonerative frame in the case of immi-
gration, it was harmed, in contrast, by a frame of blame related to the way it
managed the "peace process".

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[9] The class model is the usual one in this kind of study: Goldthorpe's five category model.
[10] The ideological distance is the difference between the distance of the voter's self-place-
ment and her placement of the two parties that make up the dependent variables (PP/PSOE).

Table 3. Logistic regression to estimate the effect of agenda issues on voting Dependent variable: vote PP (1) / PSOE (0)

	All voters Coefficient (error) Signif. [Changes in predicted probabilities]	Only position 5 Coefficient (error) Signif. [Changes in predicted probabilities]
Social Class (Ref. Cat.: unskilled manual)		
• Self-Employed	0.84 (0.19) **	0.74 (0.30) **
• Service Class	0.72 (0.21) **	0.71 (0.34) *
• Non-manual	0.28 (0.22)	0.49 (0.35)
• Skilled manual	0.05 (0.18)	0.21 (0.29)
Education (Ref. Cat.: Primary level)		
• Secondary	-0.18 (0.16)	-0,17 (0.25)
• University I	0.06 (0.25)	0.23 (0.37)
• University II	0.55 (0.26) *	1.08 (0.44) *
Ideological distance	-0.53 (0.03) **	-0.39 (0.05) **
Economy	0.45 (0.08) ** [**0.30**]	0.32 (0.13) ** [**0.28**]
Terrorism	0.59 (0.07) ** [**0.37**]	0.53 (0.12) ** [**0.42**]
Immigration	0.35 (0.08) ** [**0.23**]	0.42 (0.12) ** [**0.34**]
Number of cases	2721	649
Chi squared	1835.9	226.8
Pseudo R2	0.53	0.26

Source: CIS panel study 2750-2757 (2008). *Significant at 95%. **Significant at 99%.

4. Double conclusion

We began this article by studying the rationale behind political polarization strategies, showing both the objectives that they pursue and the two kinds of effects they generate: on one hand, they increase participation while, on the other, they move the parties away from the median voter. This first conclusion seems, at first glance, to contradict the hypothesis of Ansolabehere and Iyengar (polarization and negativism feed abstention) and support, in contrast, the hypothesis of Martin (2008) in the sense that negativism stimulated participation in elections. But both hypotheses may also be compatible, so that abstention from elections by the more moderate voters is more than compensated for by the increase in participation from the more radical voters.

In agreement with our main hypothesis, the media were successful not only in managing the thematic agenda, focused obsessively on terrorism, but

also in making the government responsible for that agenda, as can be gathered from the dominant frame of terrorism ("weakness and concessions"). Far from being an isolated phenomenon, this unarguable leading role of terrorism is part of a well-known pattern, typical of situations of political polarization, according to which the *positional* issues –the ones that mark an ideological position– are displaced by ideologically *transversal* issues (Maravall 2008). This tendency is fundamental to understanding why the socialist government did not manage to capitalize on its achievements in the social and economic terrains and why the economy continues to be its Achilles' heel in citizens' evaluations.

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