

A Look at Valencia's Elections of the 28th of April and the 26th of May 2019

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the main features of the Valencian media coverage of the elections held in Spain in the Spring of 2019 (General, Regional, Municipal, and European elections). We shine a spotlight on the key themes covered by the main newspapers, radio and TV stations, and on the campaign strategies parties used to define ideological blocs on the left and right.

Keywords: election campaigns, Valencian Autonomous Community, elections, candidates, debates, mass media, press.

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INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

On the 28th of April, Pedro Sánchez (Spain's President) decided to bring forward the date of the Spanish General Election to the 26th of May 2019. The President of Valencia's Regional Government, Ximo Puig, subsequently decided to hold the regional elections on the say day (26th of May). This upset the election campaigns planned by the political parties

both in Spain and in the Valencian Autonomous Community [autonomous region]. This paper analyses how the electoral campaigns changed as a result, based on the following initial hypotheses:

H1: The confluence of the General Election and the Regional Election clearly influenced the news agendas of Valencia's media (press,

digital press, radio and television). The media had to change their planned reporting criteria to ensure proper coverage in a wholly new political scenario.

H2: Another important impact of holding both elections on the same day was the spill-over from the General Election campaign to the regional one. This spill-over could be seen in both what one might term *political narratives* and the weight given to the media. The upshot was that coverage of the Regional Election got pushed into the background by media coverage of the General Election (Berganza, 2008). Furthermore, Ximo Puig's attempts to get *The Valencian Agenda* covered by the national media failed — a political error because this had been a key reason for him choosing to make the date of the Regional Election coincide with that of the national one.

H3: Henceforth in the Valencian elections, the confluence of the Regional Election with the General Election (despite opposition by *Compromís*) meant that the general Left-Right party discourse held sway throughout.

In testing these hypotheses, this paper presents key aspects of the campaign coverage for the General and Regional elections between the 12th and the 26th of April, focusing particularly on an event we consider of fundamental importance, namely Ximo Puig's announcement on the 4th of March 2020 that the date of the Regional Election would be brought forward. We also analyse the subsequent electoral campaigns that ran between the 10th and 24th of May for the Municipal and European elections.

To ensure that the Valencian media's news coverage was properly represented, we drew on information on the campaigns published in both the printed and digital versions of *Levante-EMV* (LEV), *Las Provincias* (PROV), *El Periódico Mediterráneo* (MED), and *Diario Información* (INF) newspapers, as well as

in the digital newspapers *Valencia Plaza* (VPZA) and *Diari La Veu* (VEU). With regard to audiovisual media, we took into account the coverage of: (1) Atresmedia; (2) TVE; (3) TVE-Comunidad Valenciana; (4) À Punt TV; (5) Cadena SER (the radio network with the most listeners in The Valencian Country). When it comes to audiovisual media, we chose to study nine radio and TV election debates, bearing in mind that their rebroadcast by social networks through streaming had a multiplier effect in terms of reaching potential voters. The social media channelled a fair chunk of the political discourse from public institutions, private entities, and citizens themselves (Campos, Valera Ordaz, and López García, 2015). Television continues to play a big role in shaping public opinion through news and current affairs programmes (Casero Ripollés and Marzal, 2011a). The debates, whether broadcast by radio or television, attract audiences precisely because they include the cut-and-thrust of politics, representing various viewpoints. That is why they are seen as a tool that lets the electorate weigh up political opinions, compare the candidates in terms of their ideas, backgrounds, and public image (Marín, 2003).

Likewise, an analysis was made of the news treatment adopted by these media. Here, we focused on two key aspects: (1) the subjects that were over-represented and the news priorities in each of the periods studied; (2) the leaders in the parties' election strategies. These two aspects make up what one might call a *Valencian look* at the chosen campaigns.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

On the 15th of February 2019, the President of the Spanish Government, Pedro Sánchez, announced his decision to dissolve the Spanish Parliament (*las Cortes Generales*) and call a General Election for the 28th of April. Sánchez stated that he had taken the decision after finding it impossible to pass the State Budget [*Presupuestos Generales del Estado* — PGE]. The budget

Table 1 Analysed election debates

Audio-visual media	General Election	Regional Election	Municipal Elections	European Election
Atresmedia	23 rd April			
TVE	22 nd April			
TVE -C. Valenciana		17 th April		
À Punt TV	24 th April			
Cadena SER	15 th April		10 th May Valencia, Alacant and Castelló	13 th May

Source: The Authors.

Bill had been blocked by the votes of Centre-Right parties and by Catalan pro-independence parties. A couple of weeks later on the 4th of March, the President of The Valencian Country, Ximo Puig, took an unexpected decision, namely to bring the Regional, Municipal, and European elections — originally scheduled for the 26th of May — and hold them on the same date as Spain's General Election, to wit, the 28th of April. Puig's statement linked his decision to the exercise of Valencian self-government:

Spain's approval of Valencia's reformed Statute of Autonomy and the securing of government investment in the region are welcome recent developments. Now with the elections in the offering, it is incumbent on me as President of The Valencian Country, to round off this episode in our history (...), which is one that recognises our historic tradition of local autonomy and thus opens up a new stage in our region's self-governance. This is why I summoned the Plenary Council and, in accordance with my prerogatives under The Statute of Autonomy and the Government Act, I proposed the dissolution of Parliament and the holding of the Regional Election for the 28th of April 2019.

This was the first time in the history of The Valencian Country that the President had used this prerogative to dissolve the Valencian Regional Parliament before the scheduled date for the next

election. The prerogative itself was enshrined in the 2006 reformed Valencian Statute of Autonomy. Ximo Puig's decision was strongly criticised by *Compromís*, a party in his coalition government. *Compromís* immediately opened a debate in the Valencia media on the need to tackle the so-called *Valencia Agenda* — that is to say, the problems faced by Valencia's citizens in dealing with a General Election and a Regional Election at the same time. *Compromís'* fear — which was highlighted in the Valencian media — was that the 'State Agenda' would end up crowding out the issues that most affected Valencians' daily lives.

THE VALENCIAN AGENDA

In journalistic terms, the so-called *Valencian Agenda* (sometimes also referred to as *The Valencian Problem*) refers to those issues that have been and still are of main interest to Valencian political parties. They cover some of the deficiencies found in this region. The biggest issues formed part of the political discourse during the regional legislature spanning from 2015 to 2019. They were as follows: (1) chronic lack of investment by the Spanish State in the region's infrastructure; (2) the need to pardon the *historic debt* stemming from State underfunding. The 'historic debt' has been estimated at anywhere between €12,000 million and €18,000

million in various rigorously-conducted studies (Fernández, 1998; Barea Tejeiro, Lamo de Espinosa, Schwartz Girón, Tamames Gómez and Velarde Fuertes, 2013).

When Ximo Puig decided to bring forward the Regional Election, he argued that this was an opportunity to highlight the *Valencian Agenda* during the Spanish General Election campaign, stating: “Holding the Regional Election on the 28th of April will help we Valencians carve out our own political space”.

“The President of the Valencian Regional Government says his decision recognises the Valencian Autonomous Community as a historic, self-governing entity” (A. Cervellera; PROV, 05/03/19).

The Valencian President believed that holding both the national and regional elections on the same day (the 26th of May) would make it easier for the region to make its mark on the Spanish media. This paper reveals that the opposite was true. What actually happened was that the national agenda thrust both the regional, municipal, and European elections into the shade, with the major problems afflicting The Valencian Country getting scant attention in the mass media.

In fact, The Valencian Country was only mentioned twice in the election debates featuring Spain’s presidential candidates. In the first debate, broadcast by TVE (22nd of April; 8.8 million viewers), no mention was made of the region at all. Right at the end of a second debate, which was broadcast by Atresmedia (23rd April, 9.4 million viewers), Pablo Iglesias mentioned that “The regional problem not only covers Catalonia, it also applies to the funding of the Valencian Autonomous Community”. His words were taken up by Pedro Sánchez shortly afterwards and who took the opportunity to note that “The Regional Election is being held at the same time as Valencia’s Regional Election”.

This double mention did not stop *The Valencian Problem* being swept under the carpet in both the

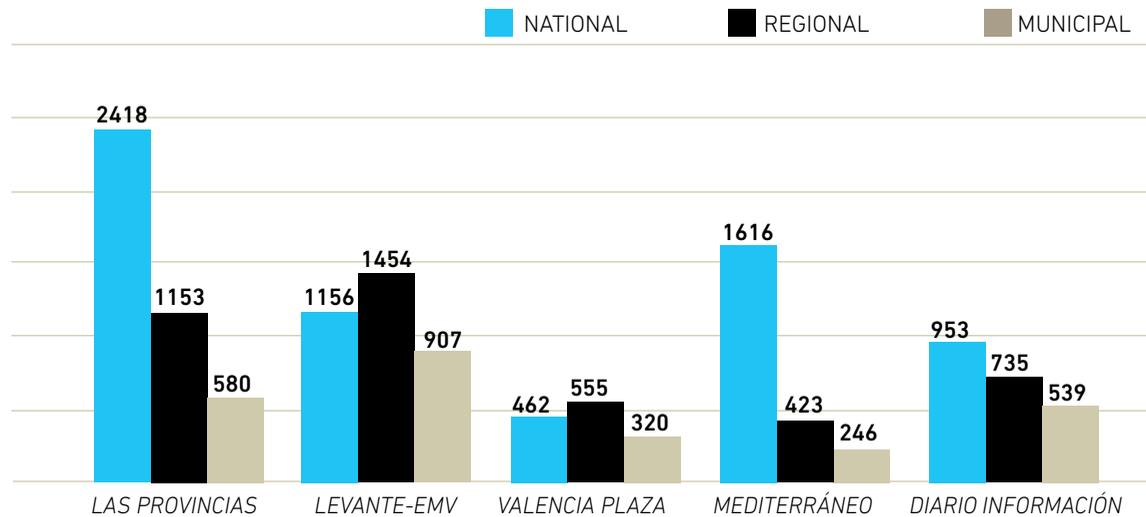
Regional Election and in the Spanish General Election. Joan Baldoví, a Compromís’ candidate, criticised Valencia’s absence from TVE’s and Atresmedia’s election debates with presidential candidates. He also scathingly noted during a debate he took part in on À Punt TV (24th of April) that, “only 10 minutes was spent talking about The Valencian Country. These debates on Valencian public television should focus on the problems we face in this region”.

The same bias can be seen when one analyses the protagonism of political leaders in the media coverage. Thus, consulting the FACTIVA Press database reveals that in the consecutive election campaigns for the 26th of April and the 28th of May, national leaders hogged the limelight in the newspapers in our study (the only newspaper not included in the FACTIVA database is *Diari La Veu*). The graph below shows the number the following politicians were mentioned in the period from the 12th of April to the 25th of May:

- The five presidential candidates in the Spanish General Election (P. Sánchez, P. Casado, A. Rivera, P. Iglesias, and S. Abascal).
- The six presidential candidates in the Valencia’s Regional Election (X. Puig, M. Oltra, I. Bonig, R. Martínez Dalmau, T. Cantó, and J. M. Llanos).
- The 18 mayoral candidates for Valencia Municipal Elections (S. Gómez/PSPV-PSOE, J. Ribó/Compromís, M. J. Catalá/PP, F. Giner/Cs, M. Oliver/UP-EU and J. Gosávez/Vox), Alacant (F. Sanguino/PSPV-PSOE, L. Barcala/PP, N. Bellido/Compromís, X. López/UP-EU, M. C. Sánchez/Cs and M. Ortolá/Vox) and Castelló (A. Marco/PSPV-PSOE, I. J. Garcia/Compromís, B. Carrasco/PP, A. Marín/Cs, F. Navarro/UP-EU, and L. Ferrer/Vox).

As one can see, only *Levante-EMV* and *Valencia Plaza* gave greater coverage to the region’s political leaders than to the national leaders in the period under discussion.

Figure 1 Candidate mentions in national, regional, and municipal elections. Number of mentions of: the 18 mayoral candidates; 6 presidential candidates in the Regional Election; 5 presidential candidates in Spain's General Elections (in the period spanning 12th April to 25th of May)



Sources: FACTIVA. The Authors.

THE MAIN NEWS AXES DURING THE CAMPAIGNS

In this study, we chose a set of themes that were widely covered in Valencia's media, whether in news sections or opinion articles, and that also traced the main narrative in the aforementioned election campaigns.

Early elections

The newspapers reflected reactions to bringing the elections forward and noted the effects of this decision for each party and in particular, for the cohesion of the *Botànic* government. Some of the headlines (translated) are given below:

“Puig ignores the objections of *Compromís* and calls early elections” (*Las Provincias*, 04/03/19).

“Puig calls early elections despite opposition from *Compromís*” (Amparo Soria. *Levante-EMV*, 04/03/19).

“Oltra criticises Puig’s call for early elections, saying it is unjustified” (*El Periódico Mediterráneo*, 04/03/19).

“Puig breaks *The Botanic Accord*¹ and throws in his lot with Sánchez” (*Valencia Plaza*, 05/03/19).

“Podemos: “We are ready for elections on the 28th of April” (*Diario Información*, 04/03/19).

“Ciudadanos: “Puig and Oltra take turns at playing *The Scarlet Pimpernel*” (B.L. *Diario Información*, 05/03/19).

With regard to the standpoint taken by the newspapers, *Las Provincias* changed its tack in its editorial of the 5th of March, stating the following regarding Puig’s justification, and highlighting *The Valencian Problem*:

¹ Translator’s Note: So called because it was signed in Valencia’s Botanic Gardens.

This is not highlighting issues; it is just a tactical gambit. There is no justification for early elections in The Valencian Country other than pursuing the self-interest of the Socialists.

Funding

The subject of the under-funding of The Valencian Country was constantly raised in the four years preceding the coalition government that arose from ‘The *Botànic* Accord’. Yet the issue was also raised during the campaigns for both the General Election and the Regional Election. All the parties demanded more Central Government funds for the Valencian Autonomous Community and blamed one another for the latter’s parlous finances. Apart from under-funding, two other issues making up ‘The Valencian Problem’ also reared their heads: (1) the region’s crippling public debt; (2) lack of Central Government investment in the region.

Here there was both “enemy and friendly fire” during the debates, with PP and PSPV-PSOE blaming each other for the chronic under-funding stretching back decades. Furthermore, they were also criticised by their allies (PP getting sniped at by Unides Podem; PSPV-PSOE getting it from Compromís). Cs, a future ally of the Popular Party, also took pot shots at the latter in a political arena that seemed more like a free-fire zone.

Some of the statements made by the Left-Wing bloc:

The region is under-funded and over-indebted. We spend less and we are beginning to chalk up a deficit — it is easy for the Partido Popular (PP) to carp. That party governed for seven years and did not lift a finger. Pedro Sánchez has presented budgets that would have meant €1400 million for The Valencian Country and the triple alliance of the PP, Ciudadanos, and the pro-independence parties voted them down. [Ximo Puig (PSPV-PSOE); TVE 17/04/19].

It is PP and the PSOE governing with absolute majorities that are to blame for not having changed the regional funding model. The FLA [Regional Liquidity Fund in which regions ask Central Government to raise loans on their behalf,

being forbidden to raise money on the markets themselves] solves nothing; it is like going to Madrid to beg alms. What we need is for the debt to be wiped clean. I the makes no sense that *per capita* State investment in Alacante is only half that in the rest of Spain. We have been abandoned by Spain. It takes just as long to travel from Alcoi to Xàtiva by train as it did in the 19th Century. [Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE, 17/04/19].

The PP has blocked a reform of Valencia’s Statute of Autonomy that would include a floor sum for the amount invested by Spanish Central Government. [Héctor Illueca (Unides Podem) and Joan Baldoví (Compromís); À Punt, 24/05/19].

PSOE’s attitude is disappointing. The party has not done anything to boost Valencia’s funding in the ten months it has been in power. [Joan Baldoví (Compromís); Cadena SER, 15/04/19].

Statements from the Right-Wing bloc:

Ours is Spain’s most under-funded Autonomous Community. It is you, Mr. Puig that are to blame for this, you and your party but all you do is point the finger at others. [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 17/04/19].

We have a system that was passed in 2009 by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to steal votes from Esquerra Republicana (ERC). [Isabel Bonig (PP); TVE, 17/04/19].

The blame for The Valencia Region’s under-funding lies with the PP and the PSOE, which have governed over the last 40 years by stitching up deals with PdCat and the PNV and dishing out the money to other regions but not to ours. [Marta Martín (Cs); À Punt 24/05/19].

The rise of the Far-Right

Another of the main discourses in the General Election campaign was the idea (harped on by Left-Wing parties as a threat) that the Far Right might form part of the next Spanish Government, and in regional and local tiers of government. Since the elections in Andalusia on the 2nd of December 2018, media fears of Vox gaining political access to institutions had come

true. Given what had happened in Andalusia, there was a growing belief that the Far Right would gain representation in all tiers of government: national, regional, and local. An analysis of the media coverage of Vox, carried out by *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC*, *El Mundo*, *El Español*, *eldiario.es*, *Infolibre*, and *El Confidencial* newspapers revealed that the Vox political rally held in Vistalegre (Madrid) on the 7th of October 2018 led media coverage of the party to rocket almost nine-fold (888%) (Enguix and Gallardo, 2020).

The media attention showered on Vox after the Andalusian elections was thus “over the top” (Gallardo, 2018), given the party’s relatively modest presence in institutions at the time. However, in political analysts’ view, this overplayed ‘threat’ from Vox spurred Left-Wing parties to do their utmost to stop the Far Right party from achieving its goals.

This aspect was widely covered by Valencian media, with special attention being paid to the impact the Far Right might have on Valencia’s Regional Parliament and on local councils. Indeed, most of the speeches by both Left-Wing regional and local candidates argued that the Far Right both threatened The Valencian Country and the rest of Spain. A few examples of the newspaper headlines are given below:

“Abascal raises his ‘Civil War’ tone and asks Catholics to cast their votes against the Popular Front” (*Diario Información*, 21/04/2019).

“The PSOE advances while Cs and Vox snatch votes from PP” (*Las Provincias*, 22/04/2019).

“The battle to lead the Right will shape the final stages of the campaign in The Valencian Country. The PP brings in the old guard to stem the loss of votes to Vox and Ciudadanos” (*Levante-EMV*, 22/04/2019).

The following issue was also covered in the television and radio debates:

Alliances that would be unthinkable in the rest of Europe [Susana Ros (PSPV-PSOE); À Punt, 24/04/19].

PP and Ciudadanos should be ashamed of themselves in speaking about The Spanish Constitution on the one hand but being willing to work with Vox on the other... given the social rights guaranteed by that Constitution [Héctor Illueca (Unidas Podemos); Cadena SER, 15/04/19].

Post-election pacts

The debate on post-election pacts was another of the thematic axes in these election campaigns. Indeed, the subject was given a section on its own in various debates and interviews with candidates of those parties in with a chance of taking a leading role. This spawned all kinds of journalism in the Spanish and Valencian media. Journalists demanded clarification from parties on both Left and Right regarding the pacts planned. On the one hand, the Left-Wing parties took the Andalusian case as their benchmark, envisaging pacts among all the Right-Wing parties (which is what came about and was commented upon in the foregoing session). On the other hand, Right-Wing leaders tried to toughen their stance by making unflattering comparisons between Vox and Unidas Podemos, branding the latter as a Far-Left party. This was a general trend that was also seen in the debates covering the regional and local elections. María Muñoz (Cs), speaking on Cadena SER, stated (15/04/2019):

Our pact will stipulate that they respect The Spanish Constitution, the concept of the nation, cutting taxes, and supporting families. We will not ally with nationalists, pro-independence/secessionist parties, Far-Left, anti-Capitalists like Podemos — which want to split Spain up ... We want an Andalusian-style pact. We are not going to ally with Dr. Sánchez or with Mr. Puig.

The General Election was also marked by the PSOE’s ambivalence when it came to allying with either Unidas Podemos or Cs as a strategy for winning over Centre-Right voters or Centre-Left voters. Even so, a pact with Cs seemed unlikely given the latter party’s strong antipathy towards the PSOE, opening up the option of a PP-Cs led government with Vox’s help.

Some statements from the Left-Wing bloc are given below:

We are seeking a Left-Wing government. Pedro Sánchez said that we are not planning to govern with Cs. [Susana Ros (PSPV-PSOE); À Punt, 24/04/19].

Cs will ally with PP and Vox but which party will ally with PSOE? We want a progressive government with those who guarantee economic self-sufficiency for The Valencian Country and that write off its huge public debt [Joan Baldoví (Compromís); Cadena SER, 15/04/19].

Statements by the Right-Wing bloc:

There will be no alliance between PSOE and Cs because *sanchismo* [the policies of Pedro Sánchez] will sell the country out to Podemos' populism and to nationalism, the latter being a force seeking to split Spain asunder [Marta Martín (Cs); À Punt, 24/04/19].

We defend the unity of Spain and of the Constitution — unlike PSOE, which will ally with the pro-independence and pro-ETA parties (...) We do not trust Cs because it has already allied with the PSOE on several occasions. If they want to, they can have a pact with the PP but they should have thought about that before drawing up joint lists of candidates for the Senate. [Belén Hoyo (PP); Cadena SER, 15/04/19].

In The Valencian Country's campaign for the Regional Election, the alliance strategies of both the Right-Wing parties and the Left-Wing parties were clearly discernible. It was obvious that PSPV-PSOE and Cs would not sign a pact after the elections. Yet it was also clear that Cs was at odds with PP, with the former bitterly criticising the latter for its corruption when it was in government. In this respect, this was in keeping with the arguments made by the parties at the national level.

With regard to the Right-Wing bloc, statements included:

The Andalusian pact sets a good example [Isabel Bonig (PP); TVE, 17/04/19].

I want all those who have robbed us to pay back what they stole ... (referring to the PP) ...and want to see an end to cronyism (referring to PSPV-PSOE and to Compromís). [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 17/04/19].

Some of the arguments put forward by the Left-Wing bloc were:

Your party, Mrs. Bonig, has made up evidence to blacken our names by abusing the powers of the State [Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE, 17/04/19].

There can be no democratic renewal with Cs. It allied with PSOE in Andalusia even when the unemployment benefits fraud was in full swing, and has cut a deal with PP in Madrid. [Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE, 17/04/19]

Gender violence

This was a key subject in the election campaign and was linked to the rise of the Far Right. Here, messages by Right-Wing leaders were all grist to the mill. They included inflammatory statements by Pablo Casado on abortion, and by Santiago Abascal denying the existence of gender violence. Ciudadanos risked being tarred with the same brush, given that in January 2019, it had refused to vote for a pact to combat gender violence. Furthermore, both the national and Valencian media were highly sensitive to the issue. The flames were further fanned by specific incidents, such as the statements made by the PP's Catalan candidate for Congress, Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo, during a TV debate.

"Vox winds up the campaign with a small rally in which criticism is levelled at Feminism." (*Levante-EMV*, 26/04/2019)

"Vox muddies the waters in Twitter with a message that calls for a crusade against Feminism, homosexuality, and the Press." (*El Periódico Mediterráneo*, 28/04/2019)

"PP and Cs give Vox data on staff working in the gender violence field." (*El Periódico Mediterráneo*, 04/05/2019)

"Self-government and Feminism against Spain and The Bible." (*Levante-EMV*, 17/05/2019)

During the pre-campaign period, the Left-Wing parties capitalised on echoes of International Women's Day demonstrations (8th of May) to stress their rejection of gender violence. They employed this theme to good effect in both the national and regional elections. It was an issue on which Right-Wing parties in general and Vox in particular came off worst. This was also held true during the campaign itself, as the following statements show:

I agree with the President that we are all against gender violence but I feel this should not be turned into a political football. Only one party has not signed the pact on gender violence and that is Podemos. That shows that we need to reach these kinds of cross-party agreements on such issues. [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 7/04/19].

Here, there is only one person who has said that women's denunciations of gender violence are false and that man is you, Mr. Cantó. We all know what happened with this pact. We thought it should have gone much further. [Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE 7/04/19]

Gender violence is the most abhorrent expression of male chauvinism ... we have put help in committing murder on a par with terrorism. [Mónica Oltra (Compromís); TVE, 7/04/19].

I must say that I have my doubts about the anti-progressive coalition (PP and Cs). There is another member of that Right-Wing bloc (Vox) that has said there is no such thing as gender violence. Vox also comes out with outrageous statements on gender equality. I want to know whether this coalition also wants to return to the bad old days (...) I hope they will not turn the clock back when it comes to either gender violence or gender equality. That is because such

equality is the underpinning of democracy itself. [Ximo Puig (PSPV-PSOE); TVE, 7/04/19].

We shall not flinch when it comes to defending equality and freedom. We do not like the pact against gender violence but we put the public interest before that of the party. [Isabel Bonig (PP); TVE, 7/04/19].

The Catalan conflict

The election campaigns were under way while Spain's Supreme Court was trying Catalonia's political leaders in the so-called *Catalan process* (which culminated in a Unilateral Declaration of Independence). Although the issue's impact was less than in the preceding months (when it influenced the Andalusian elections), it was still strongly featured in the national news. Nevertheless, the Valencian media paid scant attention to either the trial or the events arising from it. Yet the subject did appear in the arguments put forward by parties during the various election debates on both radio and TV. The Catalan Conflict incensed and mobilised The Valencian Country's anti-Catalanist Right Wing. This anti-Catalanism was something that had traditionally distinguished the region's Right-Wing parties from its Left-Wing ones.

Some of the statements made by the Right-Wing bloc are given below:

Pedro Sánchez has sold out Spain by making permanent concessions to Catalan and pro-ETA independence parties. [Belén Hoyo (PP); À Punt, 24/04/19]

We prefer to be Valencians first than second-class Catalans, unlike you. [Belén Hoyo (PP) to Joan Baldoví (Compromís); À Punt, 24/04/19]

Mr. Puig, I am shocked to hear you say that we are the ones adding fuel to the flames... when trouble blew up, we were the ones that went to Alsasua [a town in Navarre]. These stoking up strife are others, including some of Dr. Sánchez's partners. [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 17/04/19].

Left-Wing party statements included:

Stoking regional confrontation in Spain makes no sense but that is precisely what the Right-Wing does. The solution to these squabbles is The Rule of Law, commonsense, and dialogue. [Ximo Puig (PSPV-PSOE); TVE, 17/04/19]

Self-government provides welfare and opportunities... The model of a decentralised State is what works best. [Reply by Joan Baldoví (Compromís) to Ximo Puig (PSPV-PSOE); À Punt, 24/04/19]

We have to advance towards a Federal State that truly acknowledges the multi-national nature of Spain. There are forces at work that are tearing Spain apart but they are not the ones you say, Mrs. Bonig and Mr. Cantó. You seek conflict and trouble where none exist. [Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE, 17/04/19]

One should also add that the issue is linked to the possible pardon of imprisoned Catalan politicians. This was another stick the Right-Wing used to beat the Left-Wing with during the election campaign.

The language issue, and Health

The language issue and Health are two subjects that crop up in every election period. The 2019 elections proved no exception to the rule. Education, and with the language conflict in The Valencian Country (which has two official languages: Valencian and Castilian) proved to be one of the star themes in the Regional Election. The Partido Popular (PP) proposed each school choose the language in which it teaches, and that at one in five schools, 80% of the subjects be taught in English. Cs also proposed schools freely choose in which language they taught, with the party promising that if it won, free English and sport would be laid on for children in July.

The difference between when the *sanchista* [Sánchez-led] coalition was in power and when the PP governed is that we took a non-partisan approach. Education and Health are

two fields where one can clearly see a world of difference.” [Isabel Bonig (PP); TVE, 17/04/19].

English? But only 6% of those graduating spoke fair English! (when the PP was the party in office in Valencia’s Regional Government). [Mónica Oltra (Compromís); TVE, 17/04/19].

The PP says that there are still school huts when it was precisely that party which stuffed children into them in the first place. Now Mr. Cantó says that he wants to govern with those who threw up all these huts. Let’s focus on the facts... we have done a great deal and our mission is to finish the job. [Rubén Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE, 17/04/19].

You have spoken about indoctrination, Mr. Puig. I am going to speak about linguistic impositions on the lines of Catalonia’s ‘language immersion programme’. A network of 205 nursery schools has been set up in which not a single class in Spanish [Castilian] is taught during the week. [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 17/04/19]

Public and Private Health provision and waiting lists were also seized upon by the two blocs in putting forward their election manifestos:

It all boils down to the underlying model. In the PP and Ciudadanos cases, they clearly want a privatised education and health system. At the height of the economic crisis, PP axed €10,000 million from Education and Health precisely when people most needed such services. [Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem); TVE, 17/04/19]

It was you who faked the Health waiting lists. The first thing we did when we came to power was reveal the list of 10,420 patients that you had swept under the carpet, among so many other things. [Mónica Oltra (Compromís); TVE, 17/04/19]

If the waiting lists have grown longer, Mr. Puig and Mrs. Oltra, it is because among other things, the first thing Mrs. Montón did was to appoint a pal of hers in the PSC as Director of the La Fe hospital. [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 17/04/19]

You had 8,500 patients more on the waiting list than the last PP government. [Isabel Bonig (PP); TVE, 17/04/19]

The Municipal Elections

The main cities in The Valencian Country also featured debates on both the regional public broadcasting network À Punt and in Cadena SER and other forums. These debates also revealed arguments polarising on Left-Right lines. In the political debates covering mayoral candidates for the City of Valencia, the Left-Wing bloc bet on repeating the pact during its previous term of office. It demanded the city's democratic renewal and promised to put an end to *corruption, waste, and soaring debt*. For instance:

Valencia has crawled out of the pit of corruption to reach the sunlit uplands of honesty... We have cut public debt by half. We have managed things well so that citizens can once again take pride in a city that enshrines honesty, justice, environmental sustainability, and plural values in all its dealings. [Joan Ribó (Compromís); Cadena SER, 10/05/19].

Cs and PP criticised the coalition for management weaknesses and the squabbles among its partners. The emergence of Vox and potential alliances with other Right-Wing parties was also reflected in the debate:

I am not going to ally with anyone who is willing to open the doors of City Hall to the Far Right (an allusion to Vox). (...) The Far Right is close to grabbing power and I will do my utmost to make sure it does not get into the City Council. [Sandra Gómez (PSPV-PSOE); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

One of the main themes in the debates was the transport model used in cities to cut pollution. The proposal was to have fewer cars and more bicycles. This was a common theme that also appeared in the SER radio debate in Alacante. The city's Left-Wing bloc also sought a change in model to boost the use of public transport and bicycles, as well as the setting up of a Metropolitan Transport Authority. This debate highlighted the fierce battle between PP and Cs for Centre-Right voters.

You have swanned through the last four years in Alicante without doing anything worthwhile. [Luis Barcala (PP) reproaching Mari Carmen Sánchez." (Cs); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

You need to think about it ... You have wasted the last four years. [Mari Carmen Sánchez (Cs); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

The five candidates all agreed that the cleanliness of Alacante should be a priority in the next legislature. In Castelló, progressive forces showed interest in renewing The Grao Pact and focused on corruption. The PP candidate, Begoña Carrasco, criticised Marco for not living up to the idea that "his shoes were his official car" — something that Marco had said would be the case in the 2015 election. This stung the Mayor (Marco) into saying that Fabra having been "charged, found guilty, and who had served a sentence" was once again on the political scene.

They continue living in the past and with the idea that "things were better under General Franco". It has been a legislature full of big headlines and stories but short on deeds. [Begoña Carrasco (PP); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

A wasted legislature. [Alejandro Marín-Buck (Cs); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

The Grao Pact brought the PP's long spell in the city's government to an end. It was a period in which they treated the municipality like a Monopoly board so that their pals could make a killing by robbing The Community Chest. [Fernando Navarro (Unides Podem); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

Another key theme was the General Infrastructure Plan, which the Left-Wing parties presented as a challenge because it would bring "a great deal of wealth and many jobs to the city":

It should be put into action as soon as possible — preparations have been made for the execution stage. [Ignasi García (Compromís); Cadena SER, 10/05/19]

What about the European Elections?

European issues got less coverage in Valencian newspapers than they deserved. Earlier studies on how such matters are covered in the Spanish Press revealed that European issues were seen through a national prism (Berganza, 2008; Boix and López, 2013, 2014; Gallardo and Enguix, 2015). This is hardly surprising in this case given that various elections were held on the same day. In the case of TV and radio, European matters also got less attention, even though they had their own special programmes. Agriculture, reform of the CAP, the defence of the citrus fruit sector, and the so-called ‘Mediterranean Corridor’ [a project for a European-gauge railway running along Spain’s Mediterranean coast from the South to the French border] were the main issues in The Valencian Country’s EU election campaign. These issues were by no means unique to the European Election; they also cropped up in the other election campaigns:

The Mediterranean Rail Corridor means a strong, direct commitment to giving The Valencian Country’s economy a big boost and will bring progress. [Susana Ros (PSPV-PSOE); À Punt, 24/04/19].

We are placing our bets on The Mediterranean Rail Corridor, which we plan to have operational in 2021. [José Luís Ábalos (PSOE); Cadena SER, 15/04/19].

Thanks to the Spanish Government and The Valencian Country, we have managed to get The Mediterranean Rail Corridor included within the pan-European transport network. [Inmaculada Rodríguez Piñero (PSOE); Cadena SER, 13/05/19].

The Mediterranean Rail Corridor” serves everyone and has advanced thanks to the investments made by PP governments. [Esteban González Pons (PP); Cadena SER, 13/05/19].

We need to ensure proper funding to finish the Mediterranean Rail Corridor, which will create wealth and jobs. Getting the money will let us link Altet with the City of Alicante. [Toni Cantó (Cs); TVE, 17/04/19].

We cannot renounce this Project because it is vital to connect our region with the rest of Europe and to fully articulate The Valencian Country’s economy. [Marta Martín (Cs); À Punt, 24/04/19].

Valencia’s orange-growers need help to compete with South African producers. That means tougher phyto-sanitary controls — something that requires negotiating directly with the EU to ensure the right measures are reflected in the Common Agricultural Policy. [Belén Hoyo (PP); À Punt, 24/04/19]

The battle between PP, Ciudadanos, and PSOE has often harmed The Valencian Country’s interests, the trade treaty with Canada being a case in point. That implies agreements with South Africa.... I pledge to continue defending the region’s interests. [Jordi Sebastià (Compromís per Europa); Cadena SER, 13/05/19]

Support for European farmers through the CAP, and in The Valencian Country through agricultural insurance policies. [Isabel Bonig (PP); TVE, 7/04/19].

ELECTION STRATEGIES COMMON TO THE PARTIES DURING THE CAMPAIGNS

In the General Election debates, various parties shared certain strategies and went on to attack and criticise parties in the opposing bloc or even in their own bloc. The PSOE was the party that was most fiercely attacked, which comes as little surprise given that it led in the opinion polls. The overall panorama can be summarised under the following five lines of strategy:

1. PP attacked all parties. For example, Belén Hoyo (PP), Cadena SER, 15/04/19:

It criticised Cs: “It does not know what it is doing and its ideas change every time the wind changes”.

It criticised PSOE: “It makes concessions to pro-independence and pro-ETA parties so that it can stay in power”.

It criticised Compromís: “It prefers to kow-tow to Catalonia”.

2. PSOE attacked PP and Cs. José Luis Ábalos (PSOE), Cadena SER, 15/04/19:

It criticised PP and Cs: “Because they allied with the pro-independence parties to vote down the Government’s budget”.

3. Cs attacked all the parties. María Muñoz (Cs), Cadena SER, 15/04/19:

It criticised PP: “for its corruption and for destroying The Valencia Country’s good name.”

It criticised PSOE: “The public debt grew under the Tripartite Government as did hospital waiting lists, the number of children in school huts, and the delays in the payment of social benefits covering dependent persons. The PSOE also stopped parents choosing which language their children should be taught in.”

It criticised PSOE: “For its appalling financial management in Madrid” (referring to the national government).

4. Unidas Podemos attacked all the other parties except Compromís. Héctor Illueca (Unidas Podemos), Cadena. Ser, 15/04/19:

It criticised PSOE: “The other day we heard Mr. Ábalos talking about renewing the pact with Cs, which includes the so-called *Austrian knapsack* — an employment reform whose purpose is ‘hire and fire’ rules for Spanish workers. What we see is Mr. Puig begging for an agreement with Cs when his party refused any truck with the PSOE”.

5. Compromís attacked all the other parties except Unidas Podemos. Joan Baldoví (Compromís), Cadena SER, 15/04/19:

It criticised PP and PSOE: “An agreement was signed to allow the entry of South African oranges without any thought of the consequences this would have for The Valencian Country. Compromís was the only party to defend our orange-growers”.

The Regional Election was also used strategically in the debates both by the Left-Wing and Right-Wing blocs, albeit with differences in the discursive lines taken, which largely mirrored those set out in the above section:

1. The PP attacked the Tripartite Coalition but not Cs. For example, Isabel Bonig (PP), TVE, 17/04/19:

It criticised PSOE: “I am surprised you speak about jobs because you there is €650 million of works that you have not executed. That is why nobody believes you”.

It criticised the Tripartite Coalition and Cs: “The Maternity Bill shows our commitment to achieving a better Work-Family Balance but this *sanchista* coalition put paid to it, aided and abetted by Podemos’, and with Cs’ abstention. Why deny help to the most vulnerable women through this act of parliamentary sabotage? Why be so partisan by only giving financial aid to organisations of the same political persuasion?”

2. Cs attacked the Tripartite Coalition but also the PP, albeit less because it saw the latter as a potential partner. Sample statements by Toni Cantó (Ciudadanos), TVE, 17/04/19:

It criticised PSPV-PSOE, Compromís and Unides Podem: “Given that it doesn’t create jobs, it appoints a Cultural Minister instead who preaches that Capitalism is the enemy of Mankind. It also appoints a Commerce Director who puts off potential investors in the Mediterranean arc — the self-same investors demonised by Podemos”.

It criticised PP: “Mrs. Bonig, welcome to freedom of choice within a multi-lingual setting. Forget your linguistic impositions because you began all this, Mrs. Catalá”.

3. PSOE did not criticise Compromís or Unides Podem. Ximo Puig (PSPV-PSOE), TVE, 17/04/19:

It criticised PP: “When Mrs. Bonig was in office, the unemployment rate stood at 23%, now it is

just 13%. Today, there are 6,000 more teachers and 400,000 children get free school textbooks”.

4. Compromís attacked the Right-Wing parties and ticked off PSOE for the way they had funded The Valencian Country in the past. Examples of Mónica Oltra’s statements (Compromís), TVE, 17/04/19:

It criticised the PP: “When Right-Wing parties speak of fiscal reform, it is time to hold on to one’s wallet. When they speak of lowering wealth taxes, they are talking of just 22,000 well-heeled souls out of the region’s 5 million citizens.

It criticised Cs: “You do not have the slightest idea of what a school costs, Mr. Cantó. You say you will finish the schools with just an extra €44 million. The fact is the plans already come to €500 million. You have no idea how much a school costs to build because if you did, you would realise these figures make no sense at all”.

5. Unides Podem attacked all the other parties but only criticised Compromís over school huts. Sample statements by Rubén M. Dalmau (Unides Podem), TVE, 17/04/19:

It criticised Cs: “Mr. Cantó, you do not know that the Mediterranean project is planned for one of Europe’s most densely settled areas and is jam-packed with infrastructure. The whole scheme reeks of making a quick buck and is likely to kill off small businesses, which make up 99% of the Valencian economy.”

It criticised PP: “The Tourism Tax, Mrs. Bonig, will come here, just as it has in other European

cities such as Amsterdam and Berlin. When it does, it will help make our tourism industry more environmentally sustainable”.

It criticised PSPV-PSOE: “We had to have an election campaign so that you, Mr. Puig, could tell us the Denia Hospital should be taken back into the public fold. Well, the news comes four years too late”.

It criticised Compromís: “The fact is there were 8000 children in school huts when you came to power. Even now, there are still 4000 children studying in such conditions. You have had 4 years to sort the problem out. Just as bad, Valencian citizens have to wait months before they can get a hospital appointment with a specialist.”

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the coverage of the 2019 election campaigns in the Valencian Press confirms that despite the initial impact of Ximo Puig’s 4th of May announcement that the Regional Election would be held on the same date as Spain’s General Election, no trace of ‘The Valencian Agenda’ was to be found in Spain’s national Press. In fact, the move backfired because the traditional national coverage was all the stronger in all the elections. When it comes to the discursive axes of the campaigns, these were largely marked by a split between Left-Wing and Right-Wing blocs in what amounted to a slightly more open version of the battle seen under the old two-party system.

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