Female candidate word. The limited gender impact on the electoral discourse in Twitter *

Palabra de candidata. La limitada influencia del género en el discurso electoral en Twitter*

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Abstract

This research develops a descriptive analysis of the topics promoted on Twitter by *lehendakari* candidates during the cybercampaign of the Basque Autonomous elections of September 2016. To this end, the study includes four categories of framing and three discursive strategies that have been analyzed in 411 messages from the front-runners of the five formations that obtained parliamentary representation. The candidates have had an unequal activity on Twitter, although in all cases the policy issues have been the most common frame. It has not been possible to establish a relationship between the sex of the candidates and the issues addressed. Likewise, the presence of the gender perspective has been merely testimonial in its messages. For all these reasons, the study points out the contradiction between the institutionalized approach of the political parties and that of their candidates.

Keywords: politics; gender; elections; Twitter; Basque Country.

Resumen

Esta investigación desarrolla un análisis descriptivo de los temas promovidos en Twitter por las y los candidatos a *lehendakari* durante la cibercampaña de las elecciones autonómicas vascas de septiembre de 2016. Con este fin, el estudio incluye cuatro categorías de encuadramiento y tres estrategias discursivas que se han aplicado al análisis de 411 mensajes de las y los cabezas de lista de las cinco formaciones que obtuvieron representación parlamentaria. La actividad de las y los candidatos en Twitter ha sido dispar, aunque en todos los casos los *policy issues* han sido el encuadre más habitual. No ha podido establecerse una relación entre el sexo de las y los candidatos y las temáticas abordadas. Asimismo, la presencia de la perspectiva de género ha sido casi testimonial en sus mensajes. Por todo ello, el estudio permite señalar la contradicción entre el enfoque institucionalizado de los partidos políticos y el de sus candidatas y candidatos.

Palabras clave: política; género; elecciones; Twitter; País Vasco.

1. Introduction

During electoral campaigns, the political discourse becomes of particular interest, largely due to the public debate generated in regards to candidate discourses. In these cases, their communication strategy faces special circumstances, given that their audience is comprised simultaneously by citizens in general, by groups with a shared political sympathy and by mass media. As a general criterion of effective communication, the candidate and his or her political party must be very conscious of the identity and interests of this audience when offering content and weighing its effectiveness. Political leaders are being encouraged to function not only as senders with new tools, but rather also as receivers of what their interest groups express. At their time, movements like 15-M in Spain showed the power of social media to enforce an agenda and to critically contribute to meaningful ideological projects (Casero-Ripollés & Feenstra, 2012).

The exploitation of the expressive possibilities of the new technologies, with the internet leading the way, without a doubt presents important changes in the relationships between political and mediatic elites and citizens (Dahlgren, 2005; Sey & Castells, 2006). This circumstance has affected studies on cyber political communication, especially due to the consolidation of social media (Heindricks & Klaid, 2010) and, very particularly, in relation to the type of interactions that these media generate. This increasing complexity has contributed to development of studies that address online political communication from different perspectives, causing a great effervescence in the research in this field.

Early analyses developed within diverse socio-political contexts confirmed the usefulness and possibilities of political campaigns on the internet relying on the organizational website developed by political party communication departments (Schweitzer, 2005; Gibson, Lusoli & Ward, 2008; Dader, 2003). Following the growth of social media, studies proliferated showing the force of cyber-politics in various geographic contexts and at certain times in the campaign, based on blogs and, above all, platforms like Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006) (Andersen & Medaglia, 2009; Lilleker & Jackson, 2012; Yannas, Kleftodimos & Lappas, 2011; Abe-jón, Sastre & Linares, 2012; Serra, Camilo & Gonçalves, 2013; Pătruţ & Pătruţ, 2014; Vergeer, 2015; Larrondo, Pérez & Meso, 2016).

In fact, although television continues to have a main role in communication with citizens during election periods, political communication activities 2.0 have become a priority when mobilizing voters. The web has been considered as the ideal medium to apply microtargeting strategies and establish a more direct contact between political parties and candidates with voters, without the mediation of journalists (Casero-Ripollés, 2015). During elections, reaching less significant audiences, ideologically-speaking, is also decisive and, therefore, communicative tools that the web provides are decisive –organizational websites and social media (blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc.). Politicians use these tools to seem, paradoxically, less political (López, 2016). In fact, it has been understood that instruments associated with the web represent an opportunity to make right the deviations of the traditional *offline* strategies (Norris, 2003; Gibson, Ward & Lusoli, 2007).

The public digital sphere — as a territory of human intercommunication where deliberation takes place and is capable of fueling public opinion — tends to reproduce the configuration of the traditional public space (Sampietro & Valera, 2015). This circumstance has become especially important in those studies on the role of the platform of micro-blogging Twitter in the processes of citizen mobilization and, specifically, in election campaigns. Some recent and key analyses on the campaign 2.0 of the latest general elections in Spain (2016) (Abejón & Mayoral, 2017; Campos, 2017; Gómez, Roses & Paniagua, 2017; López, Marcos & Casero, 2017), agree in that political parties and leaders tend to reproduce the very communicative and structural logics of conventional communication, resulting in one-directional communication, programmed arguments, and a lack of effective interaction (López, Cano & Argilés, 2016; Galán, 2017).

Although it is true that a positive vision predominates on the use of social media applied to politics (mainly for its ability to correct the very deviations of traditional offline political marketing and elec-

toral strategies), its real effects on communication, knowledge, and political participation seem to be more modest than thought before (Cammaerts, 2008; Sampedro, 2012). According to these studies, the political class prioritized the web medium as a way to amplify their statements, while what is said by citizens and potential voters on social media can constitute a category of opinion that is relevant for politicians.

It is a change in the agenda-setting model. To the traditional flow in a downward direction, from the medium or politician to the citizen, and to the one which exists reciprocally between leaders and journalists, it is possible to add another in the opposite direction, from social media (public agenda) to the political agenda (Moya & Herrera, 2015). Although it seems proven that traditional actors of political communication, including its leaders, are the most heard and who set the agenda also on social media (Deltell *et al.*, 2013), a reciprocal influence has been indicated and a conditioning of the citizens' public debate on behalf of the agendas of the political candidates. In regards to this, especially noted is the advantage attributed to Twitter for dynamizing the public debate and placing the focus of public opinion and of the media on given issues.

Therefore, the consideration received by topics linked to the issue of gender seems to be an important research topic (Phillips, 1998; Castillo, 2016), not only due to the progressive feminization of politics (Childs & Kittilson, 2016), but rather also for the current popularity that issues linked to gender equality (sexist violence, feminization of poverty, social feminist activism, etc.) show in the public and social agenda. Feminization has been recognized as a growing phenomenon that is positive for humanizing politics and counteracts its generalized social disdain. In addition, from a general point of view, voters expect female candidates to have more sensitive and competent positions on issues such as education and health, as well as those typically linked to feminist demands (equal pay, sexual rights, etc.) (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Lawless, 2004).

However, various studies show that female politicians do not share the qualities habitually ascribed to the female stereotype (empathy, warmth, etc.), approaching the qualities typically ascribed to the

masculine stereotype, especially during campaign time (Schneider, 2014; Schneider & Bos, 2014). This is related to the political agenda of campaigns themselves and the ability of the candidates to attract the female vote, especially in the digital environment (McGregor & Mourau, 2016), where this issue remains unexplored.

In their work on the 2017 British elections, Annesley and Gains (2017) inquired into the presence of gender in the political agenda and by the interest of this agenda to attract women voters. According to these authors, women tend to be more indecisive and critical when voting. Although all parties tend to include policies in favor of equality in their platforms, not all manage to include said positions in their campaign communication, which is negative from the perspective of political marketing and communication effectiveness. Said ineffectiveness is even more important on social media, a communicative environment characterized by its opportunities to reach out to citizens and dynamize the public debate regarding issues that affect citizen-voters from more personal and emotional perspectives (Mohammad & Yang, 2011; Quevedo, Portalés & Berrocal, 2016; Bisquerra, 2017).

The study carried out examines the correlation between the feminization of politics, the increase in female candidates, campaigning political agendas on Twitter, and the inclusion of issues linked to gender equality.

2. Method

The analysis based on the study of the political topic agenda in campaign must consider the type of context or the socio-political and cultural circumstances in which it is performed (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001). Regarding the type of socio-political context, as a case of study, the 2016 Basque cybercampaign justifies its interest by considering, as mentioned before, two main aspects: the ideological variety of candidacies and the majority presence of women.

The Basque Parliament elections of September 25, 2016 were different from those of years before (Peña, Lazkano & Larrondo, 2013) for two main reasons: on one hand, for the appearance of two new parties on the political scene (Ciudadanos and Elkarrekin Podemos); and on the other, because of the 17 candidates participating, the five that won parliamentary representation managed to show, for the first time in history, a higher number of female candidates for *lehendakari* –Maddalen Iriarte (EH Bildu), Idoia Mendia (PSE-EE PSOE) and Pili Zabala (Elkarrekin Podemos)– than male –Alfonso Alonso (PP) and Iñigo Urkullu (EAJ-PNV)–. In the previous 2012 elections, there was only one female candidate running for the presidency of the Basque Parliament, Idoia Mendia (PSE-EE PSOE). In addition, it is important to note that the current Basque Parliament (IX, 2016-2020) is composed of, for the first time, more women (40) than men (35).

This circumstance has been favored, on one hand, by the generalized tendency of feminization of politics (Childs & Kittilson, 2016) and, on the other, by the approval in February 2005 of the Law on equality of women and men (4/2005). This norm obligates all candidacies to include throughout the list, at least, fifty percent women. It also establishes measures for the candidates to be included in lists so that they have the same chances of being elected.

Knowing the scope of this topic in the political campaign agenda and identify some type of differentiation or condition in said agenda based on the sex of those at the top of the list supposes, in this sense, an object of novel interest in relation to the current state of the research in this field. Those analyses focused on the establishment of the agenda based on ideological criteria constitute an established focus on the field of political communication for its usefulness in determining strategies and divergences (López, Cano & Argilés, 2016). This work seeks to study such an agenda and its conditions also from a gender perspective.

This study starts from the initial hypothesis that the gender of the candidate can be a conditioning factor added to the definition of his or her political agenda in the communication carried out on its social networks during the election campaign. In order to study this initial hypothesis, the analysis of messages published in the personal Twitter accounts of the 5 candidates of the Basque parties with parliamentary representation during the 2016 Basque Parliament elections is established as an objective of this investigation.

To address this objective, the study contemplates four possibilities of framing of gender topics and three possible discursive strategies. Said frames consider two possibilities for the introduction of gender perspective, via both a transversal focus on such political issues that most interest women (health and sexuality, education, jobs) and based on a specific focus on problems that only affect women (chauvinist violence, salary gap, etcetera) (Annesley & Gains, 2017).

The timeframe for sampling was from September 9, 2016, the day marking the official beginning of the campaign, to September 25, 2016 inclusive, election day. The corpus includes 411 messages retrieved from the Twitter accounts of the candidates running for *lehendakari* in the same period. The analysis ruled out retweets and only included messages that have retweets and/or favorites (Figure 1).

The selection of the sample tweets was carried out using the tool Twitonomy Premium, whose efficacy has been tested in the study of political messages (Borra & Rieder, 2014; Larrondo, Meso & Pérez, 2016; Alonso, Marcos & Casero, 2016). These messages were examined based on a quantitative and descriptive content analysis model that uses four categories or frames of proven validity in the political communication environment to frame the gender topic (Mazzoleni, 2010; López, Campos & Valera, 2013):

Figure 1. Total/analyzed messages of candidates for lehendakari (Twitter)
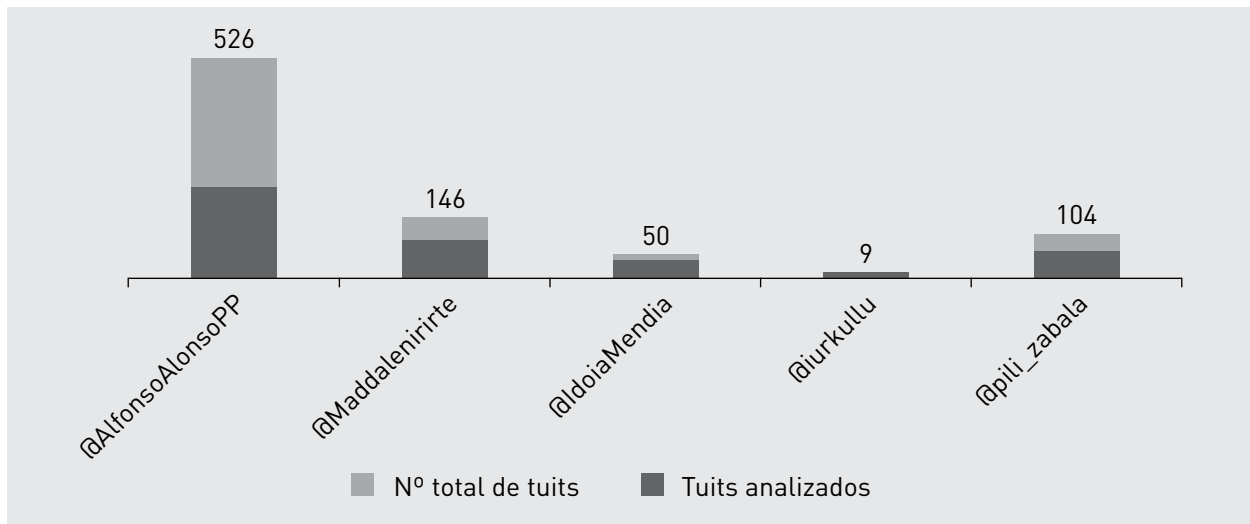
Source: Author

- *Political issues*: questions concerning the most abstract sphere of electoral confrontation (ideology, alliances, relations with civil society, etc.).

- *Policy issues*: related to sectoral politics (health, education, economy, unemployment, social justice and equality, environment, fiscal politics, linguistic politics, territorial model, housing, leisure and culture).

- *Personal issues*: that linked to the life and activity of candidates

- *Campaign issues*: that linked to development of the electoral campaign (acts, polls, lists and candidacies, etc.).

- Others: all that which cannot be classified in the previous categories.

The variety and amplitude of the thematic categories selected for this study have sought to offer the highest possibilities of classification and inclusion of issues linked to equality, whether based on partisan perspectives linked to political marketing (policy issues and campaign) or whether from closer, ideological positions and/or of personal character (political and personal issues). With the objective of obtaining quantifiable and objective information,

said frames combined with three types of discursive strategies: reinforce gender stereotypes, fight against these stereotypes or, simply ignore them (Schneider, 2014).

3. Results

The general discursive agenda of the candidates running for *lehendakari* on Twitter (Figure 2) is very similar in the five cases analyzed, in which policy issues predominate. Within the issues linked to this category, the politicians pay attention to pressing public issues, like employment and the economy (56.1%), education (20.33%), health (9.8%), territorial model (8.2%), and linguistic politics (5.56%). In no case could any reference to politics of equality be found, against gender discrimination or in relation to specific problematics, such as sexist violence. The rest of the topics do not address this issue either, not even in a general manner.

Within the questions linked to political issues, candidates pay attention to ideological topics linked, fundamentally, to the territorial model (36.4%), to linguistic politics regarding the Basque language *euskera* (28.7%) and to debates regarding possible post-election pacts (17.45%). Based on this, they focus their discourse on the ideological confronta-

Figure 2. Distribution of Basque candidate tweet topics (%)
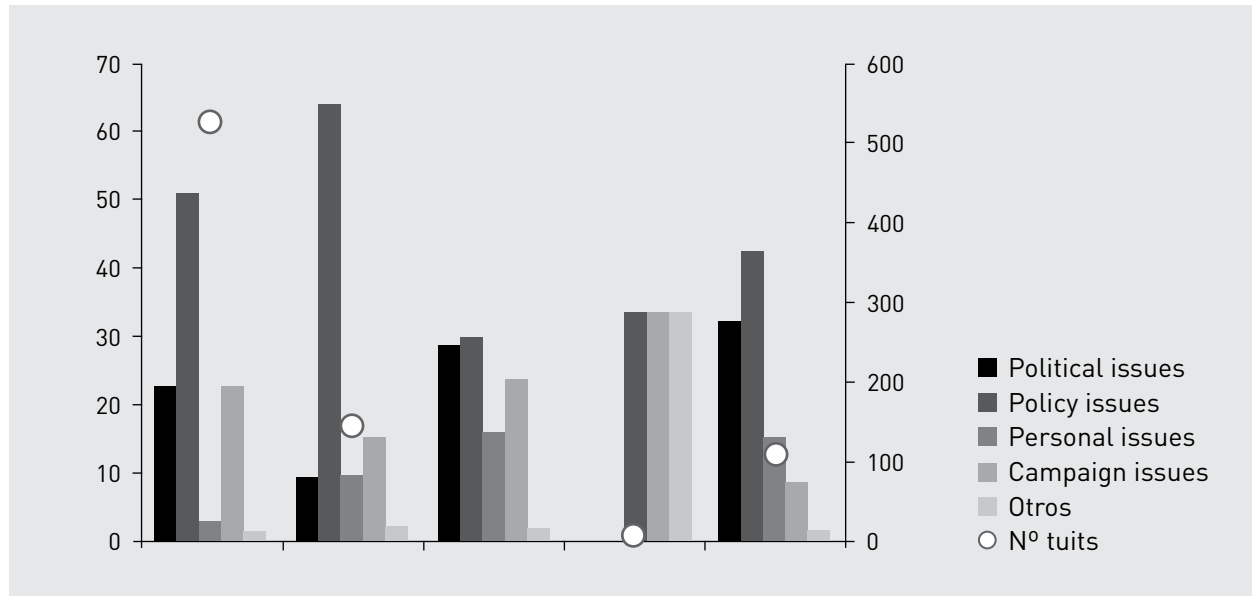
Source: Author

tion between parties and on campaign issues. To this respect, they all use Twitter for the direct call to vote. Within the personal issues category, there is a majority of thanking other for support received, as well as comments at times when they are travelling to election events, the re-dissemination of interviews on communication media or comments of personal character within campaign acts with different groups (young people, health and education professionals, etcetera)

In the case of the Popular del País Vasco Party candidate, Alfonso Alonso, the policy issues category includes up to a hundred tweets with allusions to other parties, especially to *EAJ-PNV* (45%), and also to *Podemos* (21%), EH Bildu (16%), *PSE-EE PSOE* (12%), and Ciudadanos (6%). Within this category, 4.06% of total messages from this candidate are dedicated to issues linked to nationalism and linguistic politics. The messages included in the political issues category comprise 22.56% of the total messages studied, and include questions relative to employment (7.37%), education (2.30%), social justice and administration of the Minimum Income Scheme (Renta de Garantía de Ingresos - RGI) (1.84%), and to health (0.92%). In the tweets examined, there is not any reference to or debate with gender perspective. The personal issues cat-

egory (2.76%) includes tweets linked to leisure activities with a marked political character, made generally in the company of fellow party members, as well as their political experience. Some 17.5% of tweets are classified in the campaign issues category and are aimed at directly asking for one's vote. In this category, some 5.2% of messages refer to campaign activities.

In the case of the EH Bildu candidate, Maddalen Iriarte, the discursive strategy analyzed shows interest in ideologically positioning as renewed strength, a position that tries to be expressed via the use of concepts like "illusion", "desire", "opportunity" and "solid projects" (9,22%). The very agenda of the sectoral policy issues represents 63.82% and is focused on the energetic model, the model of the State and employment. The campaign agenda includes those tweets destined to the direct asking for one's vote, which comprise 15.3% of the total, as well as reference to campaign acts (1.14%). Among the different social collectives, the candidate alludes directly to the young people in reference to its presence in the main party campaign events. The personal issues (9.6%) are focused on especially interesting political acts on a personal level, in company of other members of the party or presence in cultural acts. Far from

seeking positions of confrontation, this candidate focuses her discursive uses on Twitter in the thanking of colleagues and supporters and, although rare, there are also references to communication media. The analyzed tweets of Maddalen Iriarte ignore in its framing the gender perspective and do not offer any type of direct reference to the parity question during the campaign. Although it is outside the analysis, it is necessary to mention the retweet of a message disseminated by the party's account (@ehbildu) referring to the team of female candidates hosting a campaign event.

In the case of the Euskadi Socialist Party candidate, Idoia Mendia, there is a certain balance observed among tweets classifiable in the political issues category (29.72%) and policy issues category (28.67%). Within the previous, there are direct references to the EAJ-PNV and PP Vasco Parties (5.26%), as well as to the party vision and project on topics like linguistic politics, the model of State and the future of young people, based on positive focuses supported on concepts like "opportunity" and "proposals". The agenda in regards to sectoral political issues is certainly wide and varied in the case of this candidate, including references to the issue of employment (7.89%), education (5,26%), the euskera (5.26%), health (2.63%), and the environment (2.63%). Tweets dedicated to requesting votes and the presence of the candidate in campaign events comprise 23.52%.

EAJ-PNV representative Iñigo Urkullu's activity on Twitter is notable for being low, only 9 tweets published during the campaign. The re-election candidate's messages do not refer campaign content classifiable in the categories of political issues or policy issues, and his tweets refer to some political events of relaxed nature (33.3%) (wine harvest festival, sanctuary visit, among others), as well as personal issues and appreciation (33.3%) (viewing a documentary on *lehendakari* Agirre) and to issued linked to Basque sports (33.3%). The personal focus of this candidate's communication on Twitter differs from the focus carried out by other candidates that are much more active and closer to the objectives of conventional campaign communication.

Finally, the political agenda of the leader of Elkarrekin Podemos, Pili Zabala, shows a slight difference in that referring to awareness on gender issues. In general terms, of the 59 tweets analyzed, 42.37% correspond to political issues, with a tone of little confrontation and messages linked to change and renovation, just as seen in the case of other left-wing parties. Some 32.2% of messages refer to specific policies, mainly regarding the topic of health, administration of social aid and the economy. Campaign messages (8.47%) are linked to events, and are messages that show a personal and relaxed tone. Some of the messages analyzed with gender perspective belong to this category. Specifically, on September 14th, she posted: "With us women, another form of politics is possible. Sunday the 18th at 12 pm in Donosti with @AdaColau and @NaguaAlba". Although outside our analysis, it's worth mentioning a retweet posted on the same day: "RT@PodemosBilbao: Come see our women candidates at 6pm in Durango! Democracy, Freedom and Equality have a woman's name!".

Messages of personal character or topic by Pili Zabala (15.25%) show a vocal tone. In this section we find the majority of tweets with gender perspective. To this respect, on September 11, Zabala posted "At the regatta today supporting female athletes, a step towards real equality. Bereziki, aupa Orio!". Similarly, on September 16 she posted "@ Rita_Maestre eskerrik asko, with us a new way of debate is possible, with dignity and honesty. Zorte on!". On September 18, the Elkarrekin Podemos candidate in one of the most retweeted tweets (764 retweets and 1015 favorites) of the feminization of politics: "@AdaColau @NaguaAlba show it: feminizing politics is taking care of people via well-managed institutions''. Likewise, September 22 she posted, "We need more Adas and Carmenas so that our girls don't say "I want to be a princess", but rather "I want to be mayor...". Pili Zabala is the only candidate that refers specifically to the collective of women in her Twitter account during the campaign.

Coinciding with the results described on the main topics addressed on Twitter by each candidate, we can indicate that none of the hashtags used by these offer a gender focus and, therefore, they link to a frame that tends to ignore this topic in political campaign communication.

Table 1. Most used hashtags in campaign by study candidates

Candidate	Hashtags
A. Alonso (PP Vasco)	#loquenosune (39), #euskadi (34), #25s (23), #alonsonosune (21), #debate25s (20), #12impulsosalonso (10), #españa (9), #vitoria (6), #lavozquenosune (5), #educación (4)
M. Iriarte (EH Bildu)	#denonherria (13), #orainetahemen (4), #hemenetaorain (3), #eginherri (2), #apunt (2), #bozkatuehbildu (1), #11s2016 (1)
I. Mendia (PSE-EE PSOE)	#juntosbatera (13), #debate25s (2), #samaniego (2), #25s (1), #vitoriagasteiz (1), #pokesocialismo (1), #euskadi (1), #wine (1), #diamundialdelalzheimer (1), #vendimia (1)
I. Urkullu (EAJ-PNV)	#basquecountry (1)
P. Zabala (EP)	#poreuskadi (1), #jendearekin (1), #25senlser (1), #diada (1), #felizlunes (1), #debate25s (1), #pilijendearekin (1), #diainternacionaldelapaz (1)

Source: Author / Tagxedo

Figure 3: Most used hashtags in Basque candidate tweets

Source: Author / Tagxedo

4. Discussion and conclusions

In this project we have inquired as to the existence of a correlation between feminization of politics, the increase in female candidates for *lehendakari*, the inclusion in all election platforms on issues linked to gender equality and topics on Twitter. This interest is based on the advantage attributed to this social network to dynamize the social debate and situate the focus of public opinion and media on certain issues.

Based on the study carried out, results indicates that the sex of the candidate is not a determining variable when using Twitter to promote a frame of issues regarding the topic of gender equality given that, overall, the leaders of the different political parties barely mention these topics. This also im-

pedes observation of differences between men and women, or among leaders of different political parties. Except for exceptions of little quantitative significance, they coincide in their indifference at the time of framing their closest interventions based on a vision of gender.

This scarce presence of the gender perspective on profiles and personal messages of candidates running for *lehendakari* on Twitter contrasts with their inclusion in traditional topic agendas and election platforms of parties, which include explicitly and without exception the promotion of gender equality in its different aspects. Party and candidate websites also include commercials and other campaign actions linked to this issue and informative coverage during the campaign events that could be of interest to women, like chauvinist violence.

Therefore, it can be concluded that while the parties adopt an institutionalized focus in relation to the topic agenda regarding gender, candidates do not make this focus their own, neither from the closest or personal platforms, as it could be expected from female candidates and their use of Twitter. In such cases, in those that have perceived certain connection among the candidate's sex and their political agenda –for example candidates Pili Zabala and, to a lesser degree, Maddalen Iriarte–, there is a tendency to use feminist demands mainly from personal perspectives and, to a lesser degree, from political positioning.

A relevant aspect to consider in the discussion of this study's results would be the existence of more or less close links between candidates considered in the analysis and the feminist movement. To this respect, we note the participation of candidates of the EHBildu party in the initiative known as "Red Lipstick Revolution" (Orbegozo, Iturbe & González-Abrisketa, 2017). Based on a journalistic piece posted and titled Ezpain Gorrien Irautza –Revolución de los Labios Rojos (Red Lipstick Revolution)– in the online newspaper in the Basque language Naiz.eus, twelve days before the celebration of the Autonomous Basque Community Parliament Elections, the aesthetic act of putting on lipstick, culturally associated to the feminine gender, becomes a symbol or metaphor of the demands of political feminization and the liberty of political leaders to be supportive of their gender identity, abandoning any imposed adoption of masculine roles. Precisely, the symbolic act of putting on lipstick is a rejection of the hyper-rationalization of the public space or, if you prefer, a revindication of all the advantages that feminization can bring to politics, based on traits like emotionalization and a higher sensitivity towards those problems of current society that derive from gender inequality and affect women for reasons of sex: sexist violence, pay inequality, etcetera.

This idea in the form of an outside-party feminist campaign went viral on Twitter using the hashtag #EzpainGorrienIrautza and, although the initiative cannot be attributable in any way to the parties, or the candidates, it is a fact that the EHBildu candidates played an active role in this via the tweets posted personally, more so than election or party tweets. Furthermore, participation in said experience could be compared to participation in certain emotional social movements –feminism and environmentalism–, due to said campaign having many of the same characteristics of this type of movement, like the fact that the insurgence does not commence with a program, nor with a political strategy (Innerarity, 2019). In the case of the candidates from the rest of the leftist parties (Elkarrekin Podemos and PSOE-EE) no direct or group participations have been observed within the feminist movement's frame of action on an autonomic and state level. Although both cases have shown to be sensitive to the cause and its demands in public interventions (party events, statements made to communication media, participation in televised election debates, etcetera). Although these candidates show a certain predisposition to include a feminine vision in their campaign in terms of political issues, the frame used –just as in the rest of the political leaders analyzed– causes issues linked to equality among the sexes to be ignored as well as specific problems that affect women (chauvinist violence, feminization of poverty, pay gap, etc.).

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