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The Role of Citizenship in Political Conversation in X. The Case of the 2023 #MocionDeCensura in Spain

El rol de la ciudadanía en la conversación política en X. El caso de la #MocionDeCensura de 2023 en España

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Abstract

The digital environment has become a space for civic conversation, making it possible for citizens to generate and promote debate on issues of significant political relevance, affording a voice to a previously silenced collective. This research seeks to analyse the dynamics of citizen participation in the digital environment with regard to the Vote of No Confidence driven by Vox held on March 21 and 22, 2023. To achieve this, messages posted on X by users containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura (n=2000) were analysed. The results reveal a number of interesting insights. Firstly, citizens were the users who shared the most messages during the first session. Secondly, prominence is evenly distributed between Pedro Sánchez and Santiago Abascal, while the presidential candidate, Ramón Tamames, has a secondary presence. Thirdly, the primary function of the messages is criticism, especially stemming from parliamentary interventions. Finally, fourthly, the polarisation in society is made evident in the X-generated debate, where comments reflect extreme positions, either in favour or against the politicians who participated. The trends identified confirm that X has become a space for participation and deliberation in which citizens express their dissatisfaction and discontent with politics.

Keywords

Political Communication; Democracy; Vote of No-Confidence; Digital Media; Citizen political conversation; X

Resumen

El entorno digital se ha convertido es un espacio de conversación desde el que la ciudadanía puede generar y promover el debate en torno a cuestiones de gran relevancia política, dando voz a un colectivo anteriormente silenciado. El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar las dinámicas de participación ciudadana en el entorno digital sobre la Moción de Censura impulsada por Vox celebrada los días 21 y 22 de marzo de 2023. Para ello, se analizan los mensajes publicados en X por los usuarios que contenían el hashtag #MocionDeCensura (n=2000). Los resultados demuestran diversos apuntes interesantes. Primero, los ciudadanos fueron los usuarios que más mensajes compartieron durante la primera sesión. Segundo, el protagonismo está muy repartido entre Pedro Sánchez y Santiago Abascal, mientras que el candidato a presidente, Ramón Tamames tiene una presencia secundaria. Tercero, la función principal de los mensajes es la crítica, derivada especialmente de las intervenciones de los parlamentarios. Finalmente, en cuarto lugar, el clima de polarización existente en la sociedad se hace patente también en el debate generado en X, donde los comentarios muestran posiciones muy extremas, a favor o en contra de los políticos que intervinieron. Las tendencias detectadas confirman que X se ha convertido en un espacio de participación y deliberación donde los ciudadanos muestran su malestar y descontento acerca de la política.

Palabras clave

Comunicación Política; Democracia; Moción de censura; Medios digitales; Conversación política ciudadana; X

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have become important spaces for political participation and deliberation by citizens. These platforms serve as essential tools at moments of political significance such as general elections or parliamentary processes to invest or dismiss a prime minister (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). However, although they may facilitate inclusive civic behaviour and strengthen the participation of sectors of society traditionally less engaged with politics, such as young people (Jungherr, Rivero & Gayo-Avello, 2020), they are also considered to be the most common channels for spreading fake news and promoting political polarisation in our times (Borbath, Hutter & Leininger, 2023). Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) allow users to share their opinions in real time, with a potential audience that can easily expand exponentially and the option of including both text and audiovisual content. The possibilities offered by these platforms may encourage citizens to participate in politics (Bastos, Mercea & Charpentier, 2015; Casas & Williams, 2019), thereby contributing to a healthier democracy (Verba & Nie, 1972).

In Spain, the political changes of recent years have brought an end to the country's two-party system (Orriols & Cordero, 2016), fragmenting the composition of parliament with the emergence and consolidation of alternative parties such as Podemos and Vox, which some authors argue has effectively promoted political polarisation (Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2020). In this context, the two traditional parties have needed to reposition themselves to avoid losing a share of the electorate (García-Escribano, García-Palma & Manzanera-Román, 2021). The general elections held in November 2019 resulted in a triumph for the far right in the Spanish parliament, with Vox winning 52 of the 350 seats in the lower house. However, the Socialist Party (PSOE) reached an agreement with Podemos to form a leftist coalition government headed by PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez. In October 2020, in the wake of the COVID-19 health crisis, Vox tabled a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Sánchez for his alleged mismanagement of the pandemic response, which was defeated with 298 votes against an only 52 in favour. Nevertheless, the climate of tension has continued to increase, and the current political context is characterised by severe polarisation. According to data from the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2022), 86% of Spanish citizens believe that there is a considerable or high level of political tension in the country. In this context, in March 2023 Vox tabled another no-confidence motion against Sánchez, proposing the retired politician Ramón Tamames to replace him as prime minister, despite the fact that Tamames was not a member of parliament.

The objective of this research is to understand how citizens use X to participate in an event of political importance; in this case, the no-confidence motion tabled by Vox against Socialist PM Pedro Sánchez in March 2023. To this end, this article presents an analysis of posts on X containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura ["No-Confidence Motion"], with the aim of identifying the types of posts shared by users during this political event, the topics commented on the most, the political figures considered central to the debate, and the most frequently used multimedia resources.

Previous studies have focused mainly on the analysis of hashtags associated with social movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter (Zulli, 2020) or #StopAsianHate (Guo y Liu, 2022), or with issues related to the feminist movement (Durántez-Stolle et al., 2023) or hate speech in the digital environment (Sánchez-Meza et al., 2023). However, very few studies analyse the use of hashtags associated with specific political events (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

In this respect, this research is important for two main reasons: its analysis of a hashtag associated with a political event of democratic importance (in this case, a no-confidence motion), which is a question that until now has received very little scholarly attention, and; its focus on posts shared by members of the general public, who have not traditionally been included in events of this kind because prior to the rise of the digital environment only the political elite and the mass media were able to participate in them. This study will therefore contribute to a better understanding of the role played by ordinary citizens in digital political communication.

2. Social media as a space for public debate

Political communication has traditionally been shaped by the relationship between political actors, media actors, and the general public (Mazzoleni, 2010). However, the relationship between these three actors has traditionally been unequal, as while the general public has occupied a marginal position, politicians and the media have played predominant roles (Habermas, 2006). In traditional political communication, media outlets made a decisive contribution to the political life of a country (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014), giving them considerable power to influence public opinion (Hepp, 2019; Hjarvard, 2013). In this context, the ability of media users to shape the debate was very limited (Zaller, 1992), as citizens acted as mere spectators (Wolton, 1990) who consumed the information provided by the media and the political class (Scammell, 2000).

However, the emergence and consolidation of social media platforms has given rise to new contexts of communication (Chadwick, 2017), redefining the relationships between the three traditional actors in political communications. The ability to create their own content (Castells, 2013) means that both politicians and citizens can produce and disseminate messages without having to pass through the corporate media filter (Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, the digital environment has facilitated the inclusion of a larger number of actors in public debate, which as a result have become more open and competitive (Feenstra et al., 2017). In this hybrid media system, the interaction between conventional media and new media shapes the power relations between political actors, media actors, and citizens (Chadwick, 2017), fostering more pluralistic debates and giving citizens greater freedom of expression (Shirky, 2011). Users are thus able to produce information that can be of use to journalists and may even take on tasks normally associated with the journalistic profession, such as watchdog journalism (López-Meri, 2015; Hermida, 2012).

In this context, social media platforms have enabled new voices to join the contemporary political debate (Casero-Ripollés & Ribeiro, 2023; Casero-Ripollés, Micó-Sanz & Díez-Bosch, 2020). Due to its particular characteristics and its orientation towards spreading and discussing information, X (formerly Twitter) has played a key role in this process. In addition to introducing new requirements for shaping political debate, X has also redefined the power dynamics between the three different groups participating in that debate (Casero-Ripollés, Alonso-Muñoz & Marcos-García, 2022; Gruzd & Wellman, 2014). However, although the virtual environment provides the opportunity for interaction, politicians have not taken advantage of this potential to engage in genuine dialogue with the public (Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra & Casero-Ripollés, 2016). The use of resources such as hashtags thus give users the chance to unite and to contribute to conversations on specific issues, facilitating a new form of citizen participation in which hashtags serve as a means of mobilisation (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). In the digital space, individual voices can have a meaningful impact, democratising political debate (Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl, 2012).

Although hashtags were originally created to categorise the wide variety of content circulating on X, with the passage of time they have become a way of organising and mobilising communities around specific political issues (Zappavigna, 2015). By making strategic use of this device, users can enhance the visibility of the posts that contain them, increasing engagement with them and boosting their chances of going viral (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). In this way, they can generate wider discussion and reach a more diverse range of audiences (Jungherr, Jurgens & Schoen, 2012). Moreover, hashtags help mobilise citizens, enabling them to play an active role in political campaigns and protests (Bastos & Mercea, 2019).

X can be used to raise awareness about important political issues (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that debate on X increases during key political events, such as debates, elections, or political crises (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Bruns & Highfield, 2013). Such events often coincide with peaks in user participation on X (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & López-Meri, 2021), which means the platform could serve as a detector of significant moments (Jungherr, 2014). Journalists and media outlets can take advantage of this to identify what matters to the public at any given moment (Jungherr, 2014; Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2011).

Although participation during these events tends to be limited to a small number of users and hashtags (Lin et al., 2013), a potentially huge number of people may join in on the conversation. In this context, questions related to specific campaign promises are relegated to the background, as the most prominent posts are those that focus on unusual aspects, such as ironic or humorous content and audiovisual elements (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Jungherr & Jürgens, 2014; Krukemeier, 2014).

However, the algorithm used by X effectively amplifies the voices of users who already have a large number of followers, and therefore the biggest influence on public opinion (Hanna et al., 2013), resulting in the creation of echo chambers (Jamieson & Capella, 2008). In other words, the algorithm tends to show users posts by other users with similar views, thereby reinforcing preexisting ideas (Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson, 2014). Users are thus placed in a "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011) where they are only exposed to perspectives that they agree with or feel comfortable with. In this way, the X algorithm intensifies polarisation by promoting the selective dissemination of political content (Sunstein, 2018; Barberá, 2020). Consequently, political debates in the digital environment become polarised, encouraging more radical stances while hindering understanding between groups with different views on an issue (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021).

3. Objectives and methodology

The objective of this research is to analyse the dynamics of the public conversation in the digital environment in the context of an event of political importance and public interest. The analysis focuses

on the case of the no-confidence motion tabled by Vox on March 21-22, 2023, against Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, proposing the professor emeritus in economics, Ramón Tamames, as his replacement.

In particular, this study proposes the following specific objectives:

SO1. To identify the types of actors who generated the most conversation on X in the debate on the no-confidence motion.

SO2. To identify the most prominent figure in the posts shared on X during the debate on the no-confidence motion.

SO3. To analyse the topics that sparked the most interest among X users during the no-confidence motion.

SO4. To examine the main function of the posts shared on X by users during the no-confidence motion.

SO5. To understand how users made use of the resources offered by X (mentions, links, and hashtags) during the debate on the no-confidence motion.

These objectives were achieved by means of a quantitative content analysis. The use of this technique facilitates an objective, systematic, quantitative interpretation of the content of the posts analysed (Bardin, 1996; Igartua & Humanes, 2004). The analysis involved the creation of an analytical model based on five variables with mutually exclusive categories (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of analytical model used in this research

Type of user	Main actor	Topic	Function	Type of linked resource
Citizens	Pedro Sánchez	Economy	Information	Image
Journalists	Santiago Abascal	Social policy	Information and opinion	Post from other social media platform
Media outlets	Ramón Tamames	Democratic reform	Positive/neutral opinion	Video
Political party	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	Corruption	Criticism	News story
Leader	Other	Culture	Irony	GIF
Politician other than leader		Behaviour of MPs	Humour	Other
Expert		Results of no-confidence vote	Support	
Institutions		Pacts between parties	Other	
Social movements		Terrorism		
Unidentified		Environment		
Other		Other		

Source: Prepared by authors based on Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés (2017)

The sample for this research is comprised of tweets posted by users during the debate on the no-confidence motion. Specifically, the posts selected were those containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura shared on March 22 (first session of debate) and March 23 (second session and vote), 2023. The total number of posts collected was 8,000, of which 2,000 were randomly selected for analysis. This sample was analysed by a single person to ensure consistency in the analysis of all the variables included in the model.

The sample was collected using the Twitonomy web tool, which made it possible to extract tweets, retweets and replies shared by users that included the hashtag #MocionDeCensura. However, for the purpose of this research, tweets whose purpose was merely to redistribute content were excluded (Larsson, 2015) as they were not considered useful to the objectives of the study.

The analysis was conducted using the SPSS statistical package (v.28).

4. Results

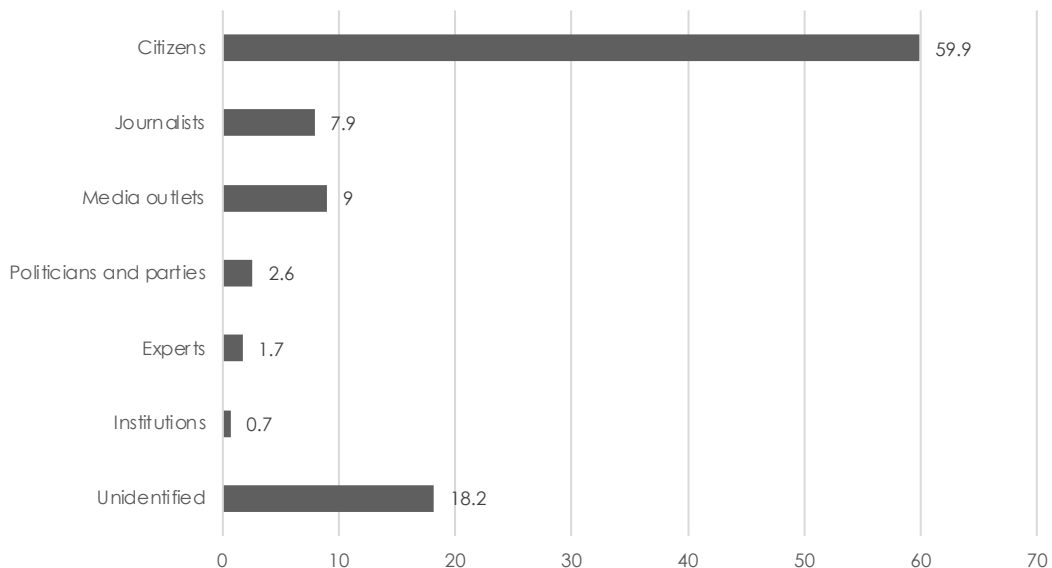
4.1. Who led the conversation on X about the no-confidence motion?

The data extracted from the analysis of posts on X containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura revealed various interesting trends in the public conversation about this politically important event.

Of the 2,000 posts analysed, close to 60% were posted by individual citizens, who represented the most active group of users, especially on the first day of the motion on March 22 (Graph 1). "Citizens" here refers to users with a profile on X that identifies them as individuals with a regular given name and/or surname and includes a brief description of their tastes, political ideology, and/or profession.

The second most active group of users were those classified as "Unidentified", representing 18.2% of the total (Graph 1). This group is made up of users who do not have a real name on their profiles and do not include any type of information or real image that could identify them. In other words, these are users who post tweets on X anonymously.

Graph 1: Types of users posting on X with the hashtag #MocionDeCensura (%)



Source: Prepared by authors

Media actors had a moderate level of participation in the debate. A total of 9% of posts containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura were posted by a media outlet, while 7.9% were shared by journalists (Graph 1). Although such actors traditionally played a predominant role in the public sphere, their prominence in the digital conversation is notably lower.

Finally, the participation of political actors in the conversation on X around the no-confidence motion was marginal, at just 2.6% (Graph 1). Thus, despite the political nature of this event, the presence of politicians in the digital conversation was limited.

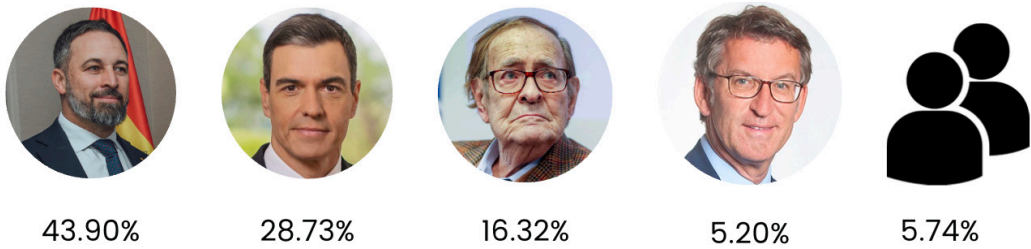
4.2. Who was the most prominent figure in the no-confidence motion?

The no-confidence motion was tabled by Vox with the aim of condemning the performance of Pedro Sánchez's government. As an alternative candidate for prime minister, Vox proposed Ramón Tamames, who was presented as an independent as he was not affiliated with any political party. Although the candidate proposed to replace Sánchez might have been expected to be the central figure in the debate on the no-confidence motion, the data show that this was not the case.

A total of 72.7% of the posts analysed were found to include a reference to a specific politician, while the other 27.3% did not. Posts with references to a politician included the politician's name in the text, and in very few cases the politician's X handle was also included. These data suggest that in most cases users personalised the event by associating it with a particular political figure.

The politicians most often identified in this way were Vox leader Santiago Abascal and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who appeared in 43.90% and 28.73% of the posts analysed, respectively (Figure 1). Conversely, the candidate proposed to replace Sánchez, Ramón Tamames, was much less prominent, appearing in only 16.32% of the tweets (Figure 1). Three factors may explain this: first, Tamames does not have an official profile on X, and therefore users of the platform may have viewed him as an actor outside the digital debate; second, he is often mentioned indirectly as Vox's candidate or Abascal's candidate; and third, he often appears in a multimedia resource accompanying the post in a secondary role.

Figure 1: Individuals featured in posts containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura



Source: Prepared by authors

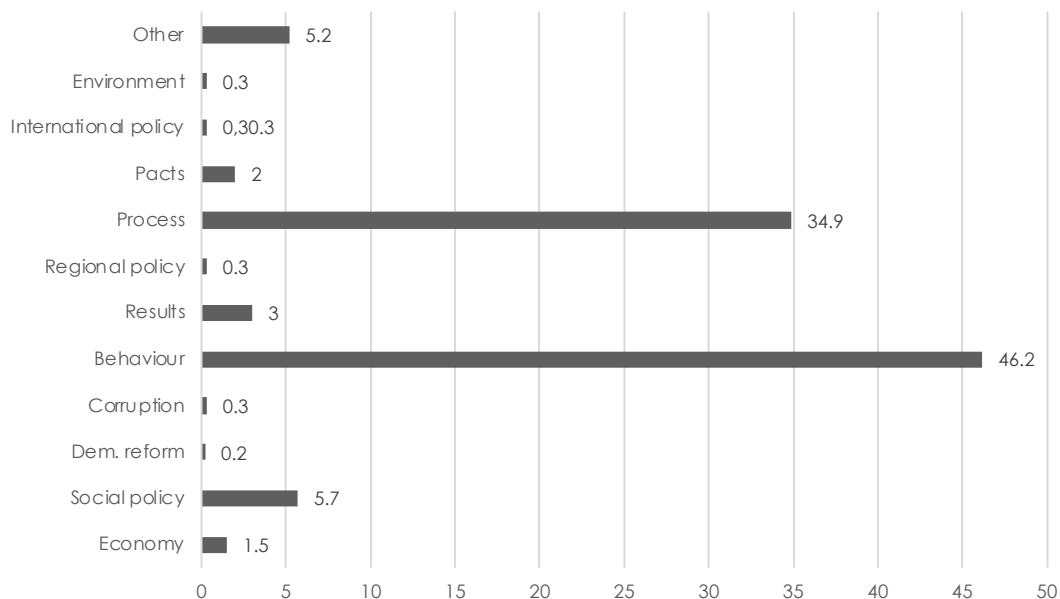
Spain's official opposition leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, played only a marginal role in the debate, appearing in only 5.20% of posts. This may be explained mainly to the fact that he was not present in the Congress of Deputies during the debate on the motion. In his place was his party's spokesperson, Cuca Gamarra, who did not receive much attention from X users either. 5.74% of the posts analysed personalised the no-confidence motion around politicians other than the four most prominent figures; these included Gamarra herself and the Catalan independence leader Gabriel Rufián.

4.3. What did users talk about during the no-confidence motion?

The role of the public in political communication has changed significantly with the advent of social media platforms, which by their very nature promote interactivity between users (van Dijck, 2013). Authors such as Dryzek (2000) highlight the crucial nature of fostering dialogue and informed discussion among citizens to ensure a robust democracy. In this context, a platform such as X, with a format based on posting short messages, can be a valuable tool for promoting public discussion by facilitating interaction between users (Coleman, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007).

In the case of the posts about the no-confidence motion shared by X users, the analysis reveals that the behaviour of the politicians was the topic commented on the most (46.2%) during the two parliamentary sessions held to debate the motion (Graph 2). Specifically, there were three moments during the debate that captured the attention of X users. The first was the speech by Santiago Abascal, who, despite not being the proposed candidate for prime minister, spoke for one hour at the beginning of the sessions. Users commented in particular on the duration of his speech despite it being merely the "opening act", the fact that Tamames did not stand up to applaud him when he finished, and the criticism he made of the way some parliamentarians were dressed. The second was Pedro Sánchez's reply, which was described as forceful by some users, while others argued that he should have mentioned Franco close to the beginning. And the third key moment was Ramón Tamames's speech, which inspired comments on his slowness, his physical and emotional condition, and the fact that he did not call for early elections as Vox was requesting.

Graph 2: Topics of posts containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura (%)



Source: Prepared by authors

The process of the no-confidence motion was the second most frequently mentioned topic, appearing in 34.9% of the posts analysed (Graph 2). In particular, these posts commented on the importance or political usefulness (or uselessness) of the motion itself. In other words, these are tweets that talk about the no-confidence motion in general, without focusing on a particular proposal or political actor. A high number of the posts addressing this topic are negative, expressing disapproval of the motion and describing it as a waste of time and of Spanish taxpayers' money.

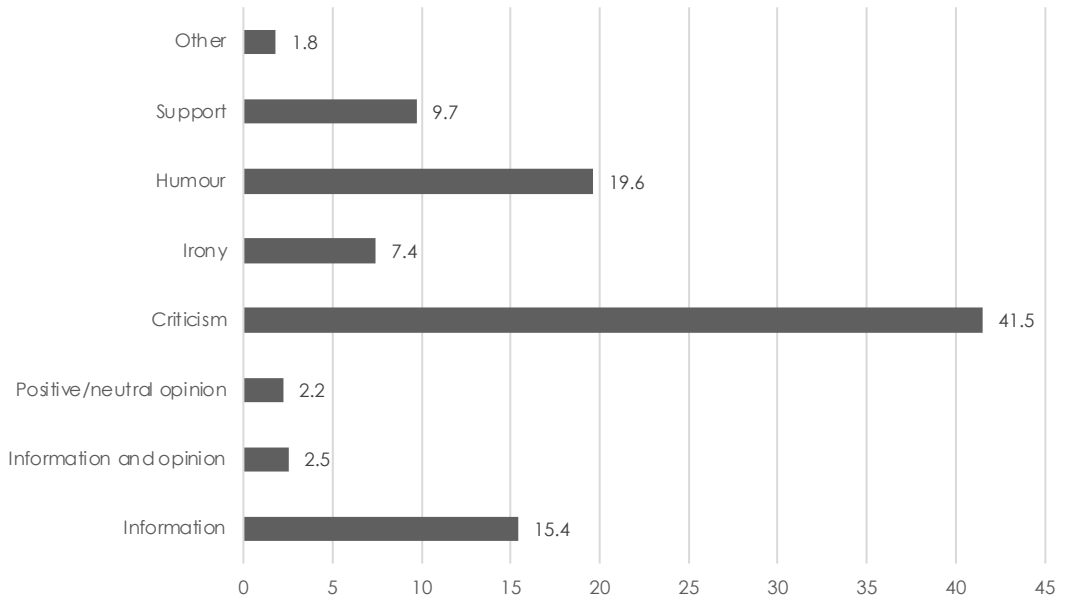
Among the specifically political topics addressed in user posts were questions related to social policy (5.7%), such as feminism and the sexual consent law passed by Pedro Sánchez's government, or the recently introduced Trans Law. On the other hand, topics such as the economy (1.5%), corruption (0.3%) and democratic reform (0.2%) were of minimal interest to users. These data reveal that the conversation on X leaned towards isolated, often trivial matters rather than specific policy proposals.

The most common main function of posts shared about the no-confidence motion was criticism (41.5%). Users expressed their discontent and disillusion with politics in general and with the no-confidence motion in particular (Graph 3), which they described as a "circus", as "grotesque", or as a waste of time and money. Some also expressed their dissatisfaction through humour (19.6%) or irony (7.4%), even to the point of ridiculing key figures in the debate. The actors who received the most criticism were Abascal (52.91%) and Sánchez (26.45%), while Tamames (29.9%) was the actor who inspired the largest number of humorous posts. The candidate proposed to replace Pedro Sánchez was the butt of jokes for reasons such as his advanced age and the absurdity identified by many users of a man who had once been a member of the Communist Party being proposed as a candidate by a far-right political party like Vox.

There was also a notable number of posts whose main function was to inform (15.4%). This refers to tweets that quote whole sentences from the speech of one of the politicians without adding any other comment or expressing an opinion about it (Graph 3). However, it is important to note that the majority of these posts were shared by media outlets (56.5%) and journalists (18.5%) who used X to report on this event in real time. These data suggest that only media outlets tend to use their posts for informational purposes, while citizens were more inclined to use them to express their discontent, disillusion or opinion about the no-confidence motion.

Finally, a significant number of posts were found to serve a support function (9.7%), referring to messages whose aim is to endorse or defend a position or political figure (Graph 3). This function is of particular importance in a context of profound tension and political polarisation. 51.85% of these posts expressed support for Pedro Sánchez, while 35.18% defended Abascal's position. On the other hand, Ramón Tamames received practically no support at all (3.7%). These data reinforce the finding that Sánchez and Abascal were the two key figures in the debate and the ones who received the most sympathy and criticism from users.

Graph 3: Function of posts containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura (%)



Source: Prepared by authors

4.4. What elements accompany the posts on X containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura?

One of the inherent characteristics of X is the option it offers of including hashtags, mentions, or links to promote user interaction and the potential for posts to go viral (Larsson, 2015).

Only 15.70% of posts were found to use mentions, while 84.30% did not. Moreover, this function was used primarily to mention the most prominent political actors in the no-confidence motion: Santiago Abascal (25.59%), Pedro Sánchez (17.02%), and Vox (14.89%). The fact that only a small percentage of posts included mentions suggests that in reality users did not seek to engage in genuine dialogue with the politicians or parties on this digital platform. However, the absence of mentions of a political figure does not mean that the politician in question is not discussed. The clearest example of this is Tamames, who, despite not having a profile on X, was present in 16.32% of posts (Figure 1).

The analysis of the use of hashtags revealed that in addition to including #MocionDeCensura, 25.60% of the posts in the sample added one or more other hashtags. Specifically, more than 130 different secondary hashtags were identified over the course of the two days. However, although the percentage of posts with secondary hashtags was higher than those containing mentions, it was not a widely used resource either.

To identify the types of secondary hashtags used, the ten that appeared the most were analysed. This analysis revealed that half of them were hashtags circulated by Vox or by users aligned with that party. Two of these hashtags are positive in nature (#SóloQuedaVox ["Only Vox Remains"] and #SíLaVida ["Yes to Life"]), while three are negative (#Stopinmigraciónilegal ["Stop Illegal Immigration"], #QueTeVoteTxapote ["Let Txapote Vote for You"], and #HayQueEcharlos ["They Have to Be Thrown Out"]). The first two are found in posts that promote Vox as the only viable option to stand up to the rest of the Spanish legislature. The other three are invariably found in posts criticising specific sectors of society (migrants) or political actors, especially the Spanish Socialist Party and its leader, Pedro Sánchez, and arguing that they need to be replaced as the ruling party by Vox. They thus constitute a combination of constructive and destructive strategies that is typical of the articulation of the agenda of the far right (Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

Another three of the ten most commonly used secondary hashtags function as mentions of a political party or leader: #Tamames, #Abascal, and #Vox. The use of the first of these three hashtags can be explained by the fact that since Ramón Tamames does not have an official profile on X, many users chose to mention him with a hashtag based on his surname. In the case of the other two, many users simply decided to create a hashtag using the names Abascal and Vox, despite the fact that both have their own X handles; this once again reflects the fact that users were not seeking to engage in direct

dialogue with the politicians or the political party concerned, but merely to place them at the heart of their message, doing so in a way that would help other users find their posts among all the content present on X.

The last two of the ten most popular secondary hashtags were #EnDirecto ("Live"), which was used repeatedly by media outlets and journalists reporting on the debate with the primary objective of informing X users in real time about what was happening, and #NoMamesTamames ["You've Got to Be Joking, Tamames"], the purpose of which was to make fun of Ramón Tamames.

Links were found to be the most widely used of the resources offered by X, as 44.30% of the tweets in the sample complemented their content with a link, while 55.70% did not. The analysis of the use of these links yielded two major findings. The first is the predominance of images and visual elements on X, confirming a tendency observed in research on previous political events, such as the investiture of Pedro Sánchez as prime minister in 2016 (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Links to images (37.73%), GIFs (9.81%) and videos (12.45%) were especially prominent.

The second finding is that conventional media outlets maintained an important role in the debate generated on X about the no-confidence motion, as 25.66% of the links identified take users to news content posted on the websites of conventional media. Many of these links are contained in posts shared by media actors, although they were also found in posts by citizens, who used them to reinforce their points of view or to support the ideas or opinions expressed in their posts. Other posts contained links to other content on X itself (12.83%) with a similar purpose. However, no links were found to content posted on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. In this context, although the debate was taking place in a digital environment, conventional media played an essential role, suggesting that X is a hybrid territory where old and new media interact.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The findings of this research point to a range of significant, original conclusions about the role of citizens in political debates in the digital environment. The first of these findings is that citizens participated actively in the conversation generated on X around the no-confidence motion, as close to 60% of the tweets analysed were posted by members of the public. On the other hand, media outlets and journalists played a secondary role in the online conversation about the no-confidence motion. These data confirm that the digital environment facilitates the inclusion of new voices in political debate while reducing the influence of traditional media (Feenstra et al., 2017; Chadwick, 2017).

The second finding is that users in general seek to personalise the conversation about the event around the figure of the leader, especially through the inclusion of the leader's name in their posts. However, it is striking that the central figure in the offline debate, Ramón Tamames, the candidate proposed to replace the prime minister, did not have a central position in the debate generated on X. This may be due mainly to the fact that he doesn't have a profile on this platform, resulting in users identifying him as outside the digital environment and therefore excluding him from the debate on X. Moreover, although he presented himself as an independent candidate, users invariably identified him as the Vox candidate and cited the party and its leader, Abascal, before him.

A third finding is that users focused their posts on the behaviour of the political actors during the debate or on the significance (or lack thereof) they assigned to the no-confidence motion itself, while relegating issues related to specific policy questions to the background. This suggests that users focus on the form rather than the content of the debate, reinforcing the notion of politics as spectacle. This finding is in consonance with the observations of previous research demonstrating that users were more active in the political debate on X when it involved commenting on questions related to politicians' attitudes or the mistakes they made, while their interest dropped when discussing specific policy proposals (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Jungherr & Jürgens, 2014; Krukemeier, 2014).

A fourth finding of this research is that citizens use X mainly to criticise important political events like the no-confidence motion and to express their discontent with them. They may also resort to humour or irony to express their critical views. On the one hand, this confirms that users express their disaffection for politics publicly on X, which they were not able to do in the past in the traditional model of political communication, in which they only played a marginal role. On the other hand, it also demonstrates that users employ humorous criticism to express their disillusion, in contrast to the findings of research on the digital conversation during the investiture of Pedro Sánchez as prime minister in 2016 (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

A fifth finding yielded by the data is that there is a significant percentage of posts supporting the arguments shared by specific political figures or praising the figures themselves. This is a function of posts that has not been found to be significant in the debates generated around similar political events

(Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017), but that has gained importance here probably because of the political tension that characterises the contemporary context. In this sense, it confirms that the current political polarisation perceived by users (CIS, 2022) has been transferred into the digital environment (Sunstein, 2018; Barberá, 2020), where users position themselves clearly and explicitly in favour or against political figures such as Pedro Sánchez or Santiago Abascal, constituting an obstacle to understanding between two radically opposed stances (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021).

A sixth and final finding is that users made only limited use of X's special features during the debate over the no-confidence motion. Mentions and secondary hashtags are used quite rarely, while the use of links is somewhat more common. When they are used, the main function of mentions appears to be to personalise the post around one of the key players in the no-confidence motion: Pedro Sánchez, Santiago Abascal, or Vox. However, the data also show that although many posts make reference to these figures, they are not often mentioned directly using their X handle. This indicates that although users aim to personalise their posts, it is not their intention to engage in a genuine dialogue with the political actors they mention. In this context, one-way communication prevails over interaction in the political conversation on X.

The analysis of the types of secondary hashtags used reveals three main strategies. The first is the use of hashtags to frame the message, i.e., to complement the post and mark its positive or negative tone. The second is the use of hashtags as an alternative to a mention. And the third is the use of hashtags associated with media outlets. In this last case, despite having been identified in previous studies (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017), the hashtags were used exclusively by the media outlets themselves or the journalists covering the no-confidence motion debate on X.

In the case of the use of links, the study revealed a prominent presence of multimedia content, generally used for humorous or critical purposes, reinforcing the tendency to conceive of politics as spectacle (Marcos-García, Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Jungherr & Jürgens, 2014; Krukemeier, 2014). In addition, numerous posts contained links to content on the websites of media outlets. This reflects the existence of a hybrid media logic whereby the debate in the digital environment feeds on content produced by conventional media, thereby combining old and new media formats (Chadwick, 2017). In this context, X functions as a kind of loudspeaker for the media, helping traditional media content to go viral (Casero-Ripollés & Ribeiro, 2023).

The main limitation of this study is that it analyses only a sample of posts shared by users on X during the debate over the no-confidence motion, as only those posts containing the hashtag #MocionDeCensura have been included. Future research could expand the analysis to include other posts dealing with the same issue. It would also be useful to study other important political events, such as a session of investiture of the Spanish government.

These findings contribute to a better understanding of the role played by citizens in the digital debate on X about important political events, identifying some key elements that are redefining the dynamics of political communication in the digital environment, with implications for society and democracy.

6. Contributions

Task	Author 1	Author 2
Conceptualisation	X	
Content curation	X	
Formal analysis	X	
Procurement of funds		X
Research	X	
Methodology	X	
Project management		X
Resources		X
Software	X	
Supervision		X

Task	Author 1	Author 2
Validation		X
Viewing	X	
Writing: original draft	X	
Writing: review and editing	X	X

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9. Declaration of conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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