

COHESION BETWEEN THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND CITIZENS' CONCERNS IN THE 2023 SPANISH GENERAL ELECTION

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the relationship between the political discourse of the main Spanish parties (PSOE, PP, VOX and SUMAR) and the priorities expressed by citizens. The main objective is to assess whether there is coherence between the issues highlighted in the electoral programs and what citizens consider most relevant.

To characterize the ideological profile of the political parties, a process of structural *Topic Modeling* (STM) is carried out on their electoral programs to measure their *Issue salience*, that is, what problems they mention in general and how each one addressed them. In parallel, the data from the CIS survey is analyzed to identify which problems citizens consider most important, focusing on the first concern declared by each person.

Based on this data, distributions of citizen concerns by party are calculated and multinomial regression models are estimated to assess how the probability of a voter identifying with a party varies according to their priority problem. This makes it possible to systematically compare the thematic priorities of citizens with those of electoral programs.

The study does not intend to establish causality between political discourse and citizen expectations or vice versa, but to provide evidence on thematic alignment in the context of the 2023 Spanish general elections, based on recent literature on *Issue ownership*.

2. INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, the beginning of the democratic process in Spain held its fiftieth anniversary. Half a century later, the political system continues to be characterized by disagreement and fragmentation. Since 2015, the traditional two-party system has been replaced by a much more polarized multi-party system. This change of system comes at a time of electoral volatility, intensified by the discontent of the citizenry during the economic recession. As a result, different authors point out that political parties have relied more on emotional discourse, showing themselves incapable of addressing the main problems of citizens (González, 2024), which increases the distance between Spaniards and their representatives.

According to the theory of *issue ownership*, a party owns an issue if voters consider it to be the most competent to address it, but this influence is limited to those individuals who think that the problem is key or *salient* (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). In this framework, this study analyses the problems that Spanish citizens consider most important and compares them with the thematic priorities of the electoral programs of the main parties: PP, PSOE, SUMAR and VOX.

On the one hand, to characterize these priorities, *Structural Topic Modeling* techniques are applied to the electoral programs of the parties to measure which issues each one emphasizes. To capture citizens' concerns and their relationship with parties, individual data from the December 2023 Barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) is used.

Various previous works have applied *Topic Modeling* techniques to study political discourses. For example, Grimmer and Stewart (2013) show that automated methods of text analysis make it possible to systematically identify the themes that politicians emphasize in their speeches, without the need for predefined categories. This study differs by directly comparing the priorities of the parties with the concerns of the citizens, evaluating the coherence between what politicians promise and what the population considers relevant.

Three main research questions are posed: (1) What issues do political parties prioritize in their electoral programs and how do their approaches differ? (2) What are the main concerns of Spaniards and how do they vary according to their

voting intentions? (3) Is there coherence between the priorities declared by the parties and the expectations of the population?

To answer these questions, the following specific objectives are defined: (1) To identify the priority issues of the main Spanish parties based on their electoral programs using *Structural Topic Modelling*. (2) To analyze the main concerns of citizens in relation to their voting intentions, using data from the CIS survey. (3) To compare the relevance of party issues with citizen expectations in order to assess the coherence between political discourse and the priorities of the population.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data sources

This study is based on data from various official and recognized sources, which provide updated and relevant information on the key variables analyzed: political discourse, and the perception of the main problems in Spain together with voting intention.

- Political discourse of the parties: The complete electoral manifestos of the main parties for the July 2023 general elections¹ were obtained from their respective official websites (PP, 2025; PSOE, 2023; VOX, 2023; SUMAR, 2023).
- Citizens' perception and voting intention: Microdata from the Barometer of the Center for Sociological Research (CIS), corresponding to December 2023, were used, which include information on the main concerns of the population and their declared voting intention (CIS, 2023).

3.2. Cleaning and modelling the themes of the electoral programs

The texts of the electoral programs were pre-processed to eliminate unnecessary spaces, special symbols, numbers and titles, in addition to joining words separated by hyphens at the end of the pages and consolidating all the content of each program into a single text. The texts were then divided into chunks of

¹ The PDF of the 2023 PP was not processable by R due to its technical characteristics (complex structure and non-extractable content as text), so it was decided to use the 2025 electoral program as a substitute, assuming continuity in its thematic priorities.

approximately 200 words, keeping the sentences complete and preventing the last snippet of the program from being too short (less than 50 words), in which case it was joined to the previous snippet.

The pre-processed texts were used to make a *Structural Topic Model (STM)*. This technique was chosen over traditional methods such as LDA because it allows metadata to be incorporated directly into the model, making it easier to analyse how thematic priorities vary between different parties and to obtain more interpretable estimates of *issue salience*.

Once the model was estimated, the effects of the variable "party" on the prevalence of each topic were calculated using the *estimateEffect()* function. To this end, the PSOE was established as a reference category, so that the estimated coefficients for the rest of the parties (PP, SUMAR and VOX) indicate to what extent the importance of each issue differs with respect to the PSOE's discourse.

3.3. CIS Barometer Cleaning and Modeling

From the CIS microdata, only the variables related to voting intention and the perception of priority problems were selected, discarding the rest of the questions as they were not relevant to the study.

First, the question "*P7. What, in your opinion, is the main problem that currently exists in Spain? And the second? And the third?*". From this, only the main problem declared by each respondent was extracted, and the answers were filtered to preserve those most related to the issues previously identified through the *STM* applied to the electoral programs: "The economic crisis, problems of an economic nature", "Education", "Citizen insecurity", "Gender violence", and "Climate change".

Second, the information on voting intention from question "*P11. Supposing that tomorrow general elections were held, that is, to the Spanish Parliament, which party would you vote for?*", restricting the data to the parties mentioned above.

First, a descriptive analysis was carried out to explore how the main citizen concerns are distributed according to voting intentions. To this end, a frequency table was constructed grouping the respondents by party and by problem

considered most important, and the proportion represented by each problem within each party was calculated.

Secondly, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated, where the dependent variable is voting intention (political party) and the independent variable is the problem considered to be the most important. This type of model is suitable since the dependent variable is of a categorical not ordered type, allowing to evaluate how the relative probability of voting for one party over another varies depending on the respondent's main concern.

Finally, from the multinomial model, probability predictions were calculated using the *ggpredict()* function. These predictions represent the estimated probability of voting for each party given that a given issue is considered the most important.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Issues detected in the electoral programs

The analysis using *Structural Topic Modeling* applied to the electoral programs allowed the identification of five recurring thematic blocks in the discourse of the analyzed parties, as can be seen in Table 1.

Topic Description	Most representative words
Economy	Business, employment, economy, housing
Gender equality	Women, equality, violence, gender
Education and culture	Education, culture, training, sport
Environment	Rural, sector, transition, sustainable
Justice and security	Law, justice, security, law

Table 1 - Interpretation of the STM themes and their most representative words. Own elaboration.

These five blocks include the main issues present in the electoral programmes. Based on these, the differences in the relevance given to each issue by the different parties are analyzed.

4.2. Differences in thematic priorities between parties

The analysis of the effects of the *STM* reveals statistically very significant differences according to the political party. An estimate of effects is used with the PSOE as the base party, the estimated values of each issue can be seen in Table 2 along with their statistical significance²:

Theme	PP	ADD	VOX
Economy	- 0.06 (.)	- 0.14 (***)	- 0.12 (***)
Gender equality	- 0.14 (***)	- 0.06 (**)	- 0.09 (**)
Education and culture	- 0.11 (***)	0.07 (***)	- 0.12
Environment	- 0.13 (***)	0.09 (***)	-0.01
Justice and security	0.44 (***)	0.03 (.)	0.33 (***)

Table 2- Estimated effects of thematic relevance by political party with the PSOE as a base.

Compared to the PSOE, both SUMAR and VOX devote considerably less attention to economic issues, while the PP also shows less emphasis, although to a lesser extent.

Regarding gender equality and violence, the three parties have negative and statistically significant coefficients compared to the PSOE, which indicates that this party gives the greatest relevance to these issues. The decrease is particularly notable in the case of the PP.

As far as education and culture are concerned, a different pattern can be observed: while the PP and VOX devote significantly less attention to these issues than the PSOE, SUMAR shows a stronger emphasis, with a positive and statistically significant coefficient.

With regard to the environment and sustainability, the PP focuses less attention on these issues than the PSOE, while SUMAR again emphasizes this issue more. VOX, on the other hand, does not present significant differences with respect to the PSOE, suggesting a similar presence of the environmental issue in both programs.

² The significance levels are indicated as follows: Statistically significant at 0.01% (***), 0.05% (**) and 0.1% (.).

Finally, in relation to justice and security, both the PP and VOX show greater interest in these issues compared to the PSOE. SUMAR, on the other hand, does not differ significantly, indicating a level of care comparable to that of the PSOE.

4.3. Citizens' concerns according to voting intentions

Based on the microdata from the CIS, the distribution of the main citizen concerns according to voting intention was analyzed. Table 3 presents the proportion of respondents who mention each problem as the most important, disaggregated by political party.

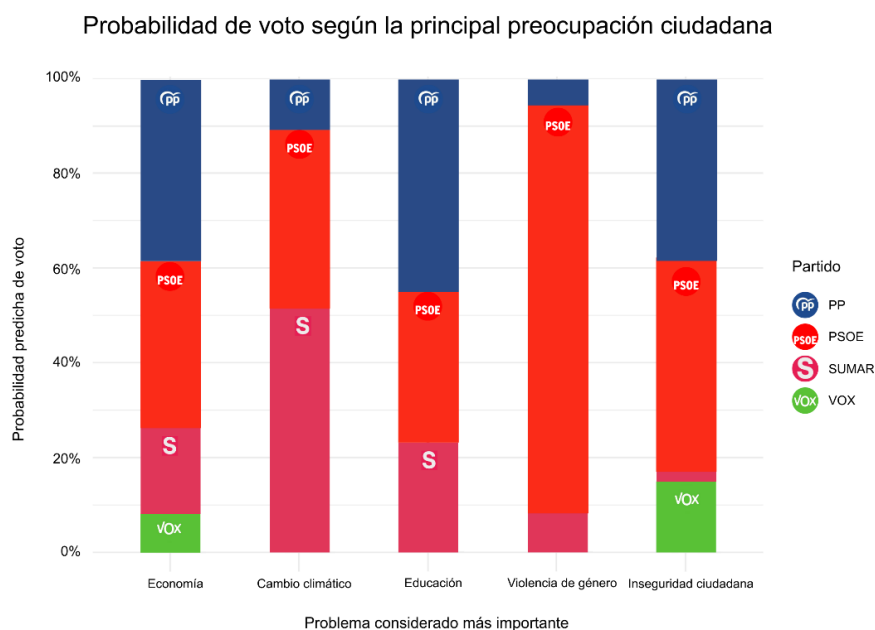
Main issue	PP voters	PSOE voters	SUMAR Voters	VOX voters
Climate change	2%	7%	20%	-
Economy	86%	71%	70%	91%
Education	7%	4%	6%	-
Citizen insecurity	4%	4%	4%	9%
Gender-based violence	1%	13%	4%	0%

Table 2 - Percentage of voters who are interested in each problem according to the party. Own elaboration.

The data shows clear differences in priorities according to the party. The economy is the predominant issue for everyone, especially among VOX (91%) and PP (86%) voters, and somewhat less for PSOE (71%) and SUMAR (70%). Climate change stands out only among SUMAR voters (20%), while it is almost irrelevant for PP (2%) and VOX (0%). Education has a low weight in all voters, but especially for VOX (0%), while citizen insecurity is the most relevant (9%).

4.4. Probability of voting according to the main concern

To more accurately assess the relationship between citizen concerns and voting intention, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated. From this model, predicted probabilities of voting for each party were calculated based on the problem considered most important by the respondent. The results can be seen in Graph 1.



Graph 1 - Results of the predictions using the multinomial model. Own elaboration.

The results show that certain concerns increase the likelihood of supporting specific parties. For example, considering citizen insecurity as the main problem significantly increases the probability of voting for VOX, while gender violence is mainly associated with the PSOE and climate change with SUMAR. In contrast, the PP maintains a more homogeneous profile, being relevant to economic concerns, citizen insecurity and education, but with less weight on climate change or gender violence.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the electoral programs through *STM* identified five recurring thematic blocks: economy, gender equality and violence, education and culture, environment and justice/security. In general terms, the parties show different priorities: VOX and PP emphasize security, PSOE gender equality and, together with the PP, the economy, and SUMAR climate change.

The data from the CIS survey reflect that, although the economy continues to be the main concern of citizens, there are differences according to voting intentions: VOX voters prioritize citizen insecurity, PSOE voters prioritize gender violence and SUMAR voters prioritize climate change, while the PP stands out slightly in

education. This confirms that citizen concerns are not homogeneous and reflect different voter profiles.

Interpreting voting intention as an indicator of who citizens perceive as the most capable of addressing the problem that concerns them (issue ownership), the results show a partial coherence between citizen priorities and the discourse of the parties. Issues such as security, gender equality and climate change are relatively clearly associated with VOX, PSOE and SUMAR, respectively. In contrast, other problems such as the economy show more diffuse support among voters, suggesting that the correspondence between what citizens consider important and what parties prioritize is not absolute.

The results of this study offer relevant information on the one hand for political organizations. Knowing which issues voters prioritize according to their voting intention and how the parties address them can serve to design strategies more aligned with citizen concerns. On the other hand, the analysis of electoral behavior and the relationship between political discourse and the demands of the population are also of great social and academic interest as a basis.

In this sense, future studies could expand the analysis by incorporating more years and electoral cycles, which would allow assessing how the thematic priorities of parties and voters evolve. In the same way, more sociodemographic variables of the Barometer could be included to find patterns among voters. It would also be useful to integrate additional unstructured data, such as social media or election debates, to complement the programs with other forms of political discourse, and even to see if there are differences between them. At the methodological level, more advanced models could be explored capable of capturing nuances in the treatment of each issue, for example, differentiating when one is mentioned to criticize an existing policy versus when a new one is proposed.

Finally, the study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the PDF of the PP's 2023 electoral program could not be processed due to its format, so the 2025 one was used; Although a certain continuity in the party's priorities is assumed, this could introduce discrepancies in the comparison. Secondly, in order to simplify the work, the CIS survey only considered the priority declared

by citizens, which reduces the information of concerns. In addition, many topics could be related to several responses, but it was decided to limit it to a single response per topic. Finally, because of the design of the CIS survey, there were no cases of VOX voters whose main concern was gender-based violence or the environment, limiting the model's ability to estimate the actual voting probabilities.

6. REFERENCES

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7. ANNEXES

The R codes and databases used for the analysis of this study have been uploaded to a public repository on GitHub, to facilitate the transparency and reproducibility of the results. All the material can be accessed at the following link:
https://github.com/agathadelolmo/cohesion_discurso_preocupaciones