Research Article

Parties in the 'Twilight Zone': Beyond First and Second-Order Elections in the Spanish 2019 European Parliament Elections

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Abstract

While most research has analysed election-orderness by looking at electoral behaviour, this article looks instead at political parties and political programs in the case of the Spanish 2019 European elections. With the collapse of its two-party system and challenger parties on the rise, this paper analyses how Spanish parties addressed topics in their political programs, using content and political discourse analysis. The article argues that the traditional classification of first and second-order elections is no longer well-equipped to depict the increasingly politicised and Europeanised political parties. This finding indicates a new way of addressing topics in Spain, a 'twilight-zone', in which the division between first and second-order elections may be seen less as a binary distinction and more as part of a continuum.

Keyword

European Parliament (EP) elections have been generally characterised in the academic literature as national second-order elections - with domestic topics dominating political campaigns and relegating European matters to a secondary position (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 8; Marsh and Mikhaylov 2010: 18; Marsh 2020: 69). However, the aforementioned categorisation has been called into question in recent years – partially favoured by the rising vote share for anti-establishment parties who viewed the European project from a more critical stance, bringing European issues at the centre of the political agenda (Hobolt and Spoon 2012: 19). Accordingly, with the increasing politicisation of European affairs at the national level, Europeans are witnessing something that is qualitatively different. In this regard, and bearing in mind the greater turnout, the multiplicity of challenges at the European level, and the failure of the 'Eurosceptic backlash' to materialise in the 2014 EP elections, the 2019 EP elections were under even more 'focus' and scrutiny than was the case for the previous elections (Plescia, Wilhelm and Kritzinger 2020: 76).

While most articles analyse EP election-orderness by looking at electoral behaviour (Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Schmitt, Sanz, Braun and Teperoglou 2020), this article will do so by taking a top-down approach, focusing on political parties and their programs (Weber 2007; Kovář 2016). The reason to apply this novel perspective regarding the analysis of election-orderness is that of the direct and powerful impact that political parties have on the political discourse and, ultimately, on the electorate (Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). Our article seeks to reflect on the categorisation of first and second-order elections in the context of the Spanish 2019 European elections, departing from the way in which national political parties treated them. The article is therefore a contribution to the literature on party competition in European elections, as well as on the ongoing transformation of the Spanish party system.

Even if the second-order conceptualisation adequately applied to EP elections up until 2014 (Schmitt and Toygür 2016: 176), the increasing politicisation and relevance of European affairs in nowadays' national politics make it, a priori, hardly intuitive to categorise the 2019 EP elections as strictly second-order (Galpin and Trenz 2019). In this regard, the link between Europeanization and political parties (as the 'identification of a national-supranational nexus regarding authoritative policy decisions') has been a subject matter discussed in academia (Ladrech 2002: 389). However, given that the 2019 EP elections in Spain were held amidst government formation uncertainty, we elaborated two sets of indicators accounting for a more nationalised or a more Europeanised debate to carry out the analysis.

For a long time, Spain had been considered to be one of the exceptions in Europe regarding the emergence of Eurosceptic radical right parties with parliamentary representation. However, Spanish exceptionalism came to an abrupt end when the Eurosceptic radical right-wing party Vox entered parliament in 2018 (Vidal 2018: 261), a few years after the populist left-wing Unidas Podemos (UP) emerged in 2014 during the EP elections. Ever since, these challenger parties have been gaining electoral support until becoming serious political competitors to the mainstream parties. Not only did Vox come third in the last 2019 general elections, but UP is currently a member of the centre-left coalition government in office. The stance of these two Spanish parties concerning the European institutions and policies is more critical than that of the traditional mainstream parties (Ramos and Cornago 2016; Fernández-Albertos and Wilhelm 2020: 221-23). In this context, and bearing in mind that these two challenger parties have become serious competitors capable of affecting the established political order and agenda, the Spanish case appears to be particularly interesting to study.

Using Challengers Party Theory posited by De Vries & Hobolt (2020) and their key concept of topic "innovation" as lenses, this article departs from the following research question: how have Spanish parties addressed topics in their political programs for the 2019

European Parliament elections? This research question is addressed using quantitative and qualitative methodological tools in order to achieve an in-depth assessment of what the dominant discourse in the political programs is -i.e., predominantly European (EP elections as potentially first-order) or predominantly national (EP elections as potentially second-order) in the topics addressed by each of the political parties.

The article is divided into six sections. First, the introduction section outlines the research question, and how it is approached. Second, the theoretical framework focuses mainly on the distinction between first-order and second-order elections, and explains how challenger parties compete in order to have a strategic advantage over mainstream parties. Third, we contextualise the Spanish case amidst the 2019 EP election. Fourth, we present the research design, the hypotheses, the methodology and the data set. Fifth, we present the empirical analysis, and how it relates to the first and second-order elections categorisation. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the research and its findings before providing further avenues for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ELECTION-ORDERNESS, EUROPEANIZATION AND CHALLENGER PARTIES' THEORY

The characterisation of the European elections as second-order elections was first posited by Reif & Schmitt (1980) in the context of the then-European Economic Community. While first-order elections are those that take place for national parliaments - like national parliamentary elections or presidential elections in France - second-order elections (SOEs) are more determined by first-order concerns or topics than by alternatives originating at the European level or considered more appropriate for it (Reif and Schmitt 1980: 3). Accordingly, there are two political arenas, the 'chief arena' (for first-order elections, i.e., the national political arena) and the second-order arena (EP elections). Nonetheless, the possibility that the former arena may overshadow the latter was addressed by politicians sceptical of the legitimising power that EP elections may have regarding European decision-making (Marsh and Mikhaylov 2010: 18).

Reif & Schmitt (1980: 9) described three main characteristics of second-order elections in comparison to first-order elections: (1) a lower level of participation or turnout; (2) 'brighter prospect[s] for small and new parties' at the expense of larger and traditional ones; and (3) weakening support for the governing parties. Interestingly, regarding the Spanish case, the 2019 EP elections could be closely considered first-order elections since (1) Spain recorded the highest historical turnout it has ever had in EP elections, only 5% less than the national elections of November 2019; (2) smaller and newer parties did not achieve better electoral results than mainstream parties; and (3) the winner of the EP elections was PSOE, precisely the party that wound up heading the coalition government (Simón 2020).

We take stock of the existing literature that mobilises the Second Order Election model to explain voting behaviour in European elections (Hix and Marsh 2007). However, this literature has so far emphasised a bottom-up approach, focusing on the explanation of voter choices, including the lack of participation (Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Schmitt, Sanz, Braun and Teperoglou 2020). Fewer articles have focused on a top-down approach (see Weber 2007), integrating other key actors of the electoral circle: namely, political parties and the media (see also Kovář and Kovář 2013; Kovář 2016). In this article, we integrate the SOE framework to make sense of political parties' strategies, as they are determinant actors in EP elections. They not only stand for the EP elections and create the list of candidates, but also produce the political programs and control the content of the campaigns (Hix and Lord 1997:84). In short, one can hardly 'blame' voters for their electoral choices without considering other key actors (Kovář and Kovář 2013: 715).

Hence, our aim is to emphasise the role of political elites in determining whether European elections are first or second-order elections by analysing how political parties treat these elections.

Studies have shown that the politicisation of European affairs has been increasingly taking place at national election level (Hutter, Grande and Kriesi 2016: 94). Lately, scholars have suggested that the increasing electoral engagement with European issues is partially due to challenger anti-establishment parties who choose to bring EU-related topics 'at the centre of the agenda', forcing mainstream parties to focus on them (Hobolt and Spoon 2012:19; De Vries and Hobolt 2016: 424). Likewise, the process of Europeanization as a term, in the case of political parties, has also been applied to the 'organisation of and elections to the European Parliament' (Ladrech 2002: 393). In order to clarify how Europeanization takes place, Hix and Goetz (2000) explain how the process of European integration impacts domestic systems and how domestic actors at the national level also mobilise at the European level. Potential for change at the domestic level can occur as the European arena provides a new 'structure of opportunities' for domestic actors (Hix and Goetz 2000: 12). In this vein, the increasing politicisation of the EU has given incentives to challenger parties to 'use Europe' (Woll and Jacquot 2010) for domestic political gain. Two key indicators that can evidence the Europeanization of parties are: (1) 'policy/programmatic content' (containing more references to the 'role of EU' and its policies 'as a factor in domestic policy pursuits'); and (2) 'patterns of party competition', referring to parties' willingness to change their strategy as the EU becomes politicised towards a pro or against EU position for electoral gain (Ladrech 2002: 396-98).

By means of drawing an analogy with the manner in which corporations compete, De Vries and Hobolt (2020) explain that political change can occur through challenger parties' ability to introduce new topics – or addressing old ones with a new perspective – to the public debate and mainstream parties' ability to respond to that innovation. The definition of mainstream parties in the present article will be that of 'parties that frequently alternate between government and opposition' (Hobolt and Tilley 2016: 4). Although with different nomenclatures, an academic consensus has been reached defining challenger parties as those that "defy existing patterns of party competition by rejecting the traditional economic dimension of politics and mobilising on new issues or adopting more extreme positions on existing issues" (Hobolt and Tilley 2016: 4). Challenger parties can be located across the political spectrum.

These new 'political entrepreneurs' gain electoral support by means of using topic innovation and an anti-establishment rhetoric (De Vries and Hobolt 2020: 2). Accordingly, 'dominance and innovation' are the two key concepts around which political forces in competition evolve in order to attain political change. Dominance 'concerns the power of the dominant parties in the system to protect their positions', whereas innovation relates to the 'process through which political parties introduce a new or previously ignored issue' while employing an anti-establishment rhetoric capable of undermining mainstream parties' appeal (De Vries and Hobolt 2020: 9).

Topic choice for challenger parties is highly dependent on the parties' perception of the 'appeal to the average voter' (De Vries and Hobolt 2020: 8), its innovative power and their ideology, so that they can have a 'strategic advantage' that can break through the entry barriers that protect the dominant parties. Examples of new topics that could be addressed include immigration, the environment or Euroscepticism. In this regard, the horizontal question of ideology plays an important role. European right-wing populism is usually rooted on identitarianism: nationalism and ethno-centrism (Hainsworth 2008) materialised in the proposal of restrictive policies on asylum and immigration (Mair and Mudde 1998). For its part, left-wing European populism has taken a more socialist approach, opposing liberal austerity measures imposed by the so-called Troika' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017:

37) and capitalism. Seemingly, in the European context following the 2008 recession, while centre-left and right-wing mainstream parties converged on the EU's austerity and fiscal guidelines, challenger parties offered alternatives that are tantamount to rejections of 'the austerity agenda and are critical of the EU's insistence on reduced government welfare' for the left and a 'desire to reclaim national sovereignty, specifically to control immigration and repatriate powers from the EU', for the right (Hobolt and Tilley 2016: 2).

CONTEXTUALISING THE SPANISH CASE

The social democratic Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the conservative Partido Popular (PP) have been the two mainstream parties that have dominated the Spanish political arena since the transition to democracy (Vidal 2018: 261). However, the pre-existing two-party system collapsed in Spain in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008 (Vidal 2018: 261), although it was not until the 2015 national election that new challenger parties entered the political spectrum - the first two being Unidas Podemos (UP) and Ciudadanos (C's) - leading to the creation of a multi-party system that substantially reduced mainstream parties' vote share. Together, the two mainstream parties saw a decline from 73.4% in 2011 to 50.7% in 2015 (Orriols and Cordero 2016: 470). Yet, Spanish exceptionalism truly came to an end in December 2018 when the populist radical right Vox entered the Andalusian Parliament (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019).

Before the crisis, one of the reasons to study Euroscepticism in Spain was its relatively low level, as Spain has been considered to be historically pro-European regarding both political and citizens' attitudes (Llamazares and Gramacho 2007: 123; López Gómez 2014). However, following the 2008 crisis, political trust in the European institutions was weakened. 'Economic issues, bailouts, and anti-austerity measures' served as catalysts for populist Eurosceptic parties in Spain (Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro 2018: 346), as well as EU trade policy, which was widely contested across Europe (Conrad and Oleart 2020; Oleart 2021) and particularly in Spain (Bouza and Oleart 2018).

The current main political parties in Spain and their stance on the EU will be described in the following paragraphs (see Table 1 for a quick review).

Table 1: Main political parties in Spain

	Foundation Date	Ideology	Stance on the EU	EP Group	First time in national government	First time in regional government
PP	1989	Centre-right (Christian Democrat)	Positive	EPP	1996	1989 (in several communities)
PSOE	1879	Centre-left (Social Democrat)	Positive	S&D	1982	1982 (Andalusia)
C's	2006	Liberal	Positive	RE	Never	2019 (in several communities)
Vox	2013	Radical right-wing	Critical	ECR	Never	Never (after Días Ayuso's victory in Madrid, Vox remains formally outside the regional government)
UP	2014	Radical left-wing	Critical	GUE/NGL	2020	2015 (in several communities)

Those parties who ideologically sit at the centre of the political spectrum and share a positive stance on the European project (institutions and policies) will be addressed first in no particular order. To start with, PP was formed in 1989 by the fusion of various parties and movements who at the time were supportive of the Franco era. It is now a centre-right party (Christian Democrat) whose leader is Pablo Casado, and it is affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP) in the EP. Secondly, PSOE was founded in 1879 by Pablo Iglesias. It is a centre-left party (Social Democrat) headed by Pedro Sánchez - current Prime Minister – and affiliated with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) political group in the EP. Lastly, Citizens – Ciudadanos (C's) – became politically active in Catalonia during 2006 to oppose the Catalan pro-independence parties. However, the challenger party would not run in all Spanish regions until 2015 (Rodríguez Teruel and Barrio 2016: 589-93). Its ideology has been a controversial feature of the party - 'beyond the left and right labels' – although the electorate perception leans more towards the centre-right (Rodríguez Teruel and Barrio 2016: 594-602). C's can be found in the European parliament party group Renew Europe (RE).

Continuing with the Spanish challenger parties who ideologically sit at the extremes of the political spectrum and share a more critical stance on the European Union, we find Vox and UP. Vox was founded in 2013 due to a schism between the PP and Santiago Abascal – Vox's leader since 2014 (Ferreira 2019: 83). It is a radical right populist political party (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019) whose ideology is based on nativism, an authoritarian societal vision, and deep 'law and order' values (Ferreira 2019: 73). In European terms, the party holds an anti-immigration stance, and their main concern is to 'halt further integration', stressing the bilateral essence of international relations and the possibility of withdrawal only in case of conflicts of interest between the Union and Spain (Vox 2019a: 23; Fernández-Albertos & Wilhelm 2020: 223). However, although Vox frames and criticises EU policy-making as being 'cosmopolitan and globalist', it is supportive of Spain's EMU membership and does not make the EU the 'object of its attacks' on a regular basis (Fernández-Albertos & Wilhelm 2020: 221-23). Their political group in the EP is the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, UP is a radical left populist political party (Figueroa and Thielemann 2015; Rodríguez-Teruel, Barrio and Barberà 2016) founded in 2014 by Pablo Iglesias - now a former Spanish Vice-President. As a challenger party, it gained significant electoral support at its inception and, currently, it is a member of the left-wing coalition government. Their discourse opposes the 'economic and political establishment' (Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro 2018: 352). The party initially framed its Manichean approach as 'la casta' – an amalgam of corrupt politicians, large companies, mass media, etc. – against the 'true people' that they represent – 'opposing the social majority to the privileged minority' (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017: 364). After the EP elections of 2014, UP underwent a platform and 'policy moderation' strategy in order to attract PSOE voters, although this was not perceived as such by the voters (Rodríguez-Teruel, Barrio and Barberà 2016: 574). Concerning their stance on the EU, the party does not oppose European integration *per se*, but argues for certain reforms (such as changes in the Pact of Stability and Growth, or a rejection of International Free Trade Agreements and austerity measures (Ramos & Cornago 2016). Therefore, the party's position within the EP could be characterised as Eurocritical - neither Euroenthusiastic nor Eurosceptic, but somewhere amongst these two (see Statham et al. 2010; della Porta *et al*. 2017) – as it opposes certain EU policies but does not attempt to 'dismantle the Union' (Salvati 2020: 15). This is more evident when looking at voting behaviour in the EP. For instance, while UP partially agrees with Eurosceptic parties in the economic and monetary field, it separates itself politically from these parties in domains such as agriculture or the internal market (Salvati 2020), conforming a more constructive opposition. UP is part of the GUE/NGL European parliamentary group.

Prior to analysing the 2019 EP elections in Spain, a contextualisation of the political circumstances taking place before and after (26th of May) is required in order to inform the analysis. The EP election took place almost a month after the general election of April 2019. This was partially the result of a parliamentary motion of no confidence won in June 2018 by the current socialist PM, Pedro Sánchez – with the support of UP, two Catalan pro-independence parties and the Basque Nationalist Party – against the conservative and former PM, Mariano Rajoy (Simón 2020: 3). However, the regional parties rejected the new budget and the leader of the PSOE had to hold a snap election on the 28th of April 2019 (Simón 2020: 11). The polarisation of the campaign was represented by parties on the left (UP and PSOE) plus the abovementioned regional parties, and right-wing parties (PP, C's and Vox), having the 'fear of the far right' and the 'Catalan issue' as the main topics being exploited, respectively (Fernández-Albertos and Wilhelm 2020: 220). The new political scenario following the election was not more promising: PSOE (winner of the election albeit dependent on the support of the regional parties) and UP could not reach an agreement over the form the intended government would take – single-party cabinet or coalition government – and postponed the negotiations until June 2019 (i.e., after the EP election). Ultimately, the negotiations failed again in June, giving rise to another national election in November 2019 and to the subsequent formation of a coalition government headed by the PSOE in January 2020. In this context, the European elections could have been affected by the preceding national election and the political uncertainty that surrounded the government formation by the time the European elections were held (as the coalition government was still being negotiated).

RESEARCH DESIGN, HYPOTHESES AND METHODOLOGY

When attempting to categorise if the Spanish 2019 EP elections were first or second-order through political parties lenses, the research question (*how have Spanish parties addressed topics in their political programs for the 2019 European Parliament elections?*) tries to identify the topics that political parties chose to address during the campaign in their political programs and how they contributed to the Europeanization or the nationalisation of the debate. More specifically, the topics are the different subject matters addressed by the parties in the political programs.

As discussed, we use the challenger parties' framework to make sense of how parties engage in an anti-establishment rhetoric (consistent with their ideology) while politicising topics that provide them with a strategic advantage over mainstream parties. The 2014 EP elections in Spain were certainly second-order; not only was the debate around Europe mostly absent (except for Podemos, who mobilised a strong anti-austerity discourse), but the campaign focused on domestic issues and the end of the two-party system (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2015: 291). In this light, given their more critical stance on the European project, and, in order to be innovative regarding their topics and approach, challenger parties could have made less use of national concerns in their preparation for the 2019 EP elections as to differentiate themselves from other competitors and previous elections. In turn, this would make mainstream parties respond to those innovative topics by also addressing them (in consistence with their ideology) to protect their dominant position (De Vries and Hobolt 2020: 9). Following this logic, a greater utilisation of European topics – in their programmatic content and as a result of party competition (Ladrech 2002: 396-98) - would have led parties to shape public debates towards a more Europeanised discussion, thus potentially contributing to a first-order election. This is what we would call the 'European approach'. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is:

(H1): The European approach constitutes the dominant discourse regarding parties' political programs for the 2019 EP elections in Spain (i.e. parties innovate by addressing

more European topics, thus Europeanising public debates and potentially contributing to a first-order outcome of the EP election).

Despite the increasing politicisation of European affairs, as discussed in the theoretical section, EP elections have been generally characterised as second-order elections dominated by domestic concerns (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Marsh and Mikhaylov 2010). Moreover, the 2019 Spanish EP elections took place amidst two national parliamentary elections held close in time to the European ones. As the government composition was uncertain, this could have prompted parties to innovate less and make use of more national concerns in order to appeal the voter with more domestic and relatable concerns. Accordingly, the 'national approach' is constituted by the parties' intention to innovate less and prioritise domestic politics in the public debate, potentially leading towards a second-order election. In this light, the second hypothesis is:

(H2): The national approach constitutes the dominant discourse regarding parties' political programs for the 2019 EP elections in Spain (i.e. as a consequence of a greater utilisation of national topics, the parties did not sufficiently innovate, and the elections were potentially second-order).

The objective is therefore to analyse whether the main Spanish parties tried to shape the European 2019 EP elections towards a first or a second-order election. In this context, the "vertical dimension of first or second-order" and the "horizontal dimension of left/right ideology" are the two key elements that affect the "position of the party" (i.e., how the parties addressed the topics). The unit of analysis for this study are the topics contained in the publicly available political programs of each of the five parties – mainstream parties (PP and PSOE) and challenger parties (C's, Vox and UP) – for the 2019 European elections, which can be found online in the form of PDFs and in their original language, Spanish.[1] There are three main reasons supporting the analysis of party programs (Kovář 2016: 99): (1) they reflect accurately the official position of the party; (2) the analysis of the process of Europeanization benefits from the use of party programs as these are rigorous sources of information that can be compared between parties and over time; and (3) political programs are tools used by the parties and media to 'shape' public discussion.

Although there is an academic debate about what is the best methodological tool to analyse political manifestos (Merz, Regel and Lewandowski 2016), two of the most widely used are content analysis and political discourse analysis (Zuñiga 2018). These allow for a mix of quantitative and qualitative research techniques that benefits the present research because it allows us to find relevant topics in the manifestos (content analysis) to later analyse each of them using political discourse analysis. Particularly, the benefits derived from using quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyse party programs has already been acknowledged and used in the literature (Kovář 2016: 100). Subsequently, these two methodologies were employed in our analysis to answer the research question and test the hypotheses using the software NVivo.

Content analysis has been used to quantify patterns in the unit of analysis and has been conducted by means of breaking down the text into smaller components or keywords (Ribera Payá 2019). Accordingly, this research technique served the analysis by coding the content of the political programs into topics. After going through the literature on the main challenges facing the EU, the authors found three recurrent topics: "immigration," "integration," and the "Eurozone/EMU" (see also: Dinan, Nugent and Paterson 2017). Nonetheless, as we reviewed the party manifestos, we additionally added topics that emerged in almost all of them ("Environment", "(Un)Employment", "Feminism", "Catalonia" (European Arrest Warrant) and "Gibraltar". It should be noted that these overarching topics were composed of sub-categories (e.g., for environment, associated

words such as "sustainability", "climate" or "biodiversity" were also coded within the same topic) – see Table 2.

Table 2. Words coded using content analysis.

	Words coded with content analysis
Immigration	Immigrants, Asylum, Immigration
Integration	Integration, Federal, Unanimity, Competences
Eurozone-EMU	Euro, Economic, Monetary
(Un)Employment	Employment, Unemployment, Youth
Environment	Sustainability, Climate, Biodiversity, Environment
Feminism	Women, Gender, Feminism
EAW/Catalonia	Catalonia, Arrest, Warrant
Gibraltar	Gibraltar

After systematically identifying what were the topics covered by the main Spanish parties, and inspired by the explanations of Pardo (2012: 7) regarding his work on the Europeanization of political programs, content analysis was supplemented by hand coding longer semantic structures into the already coded topics. Political discourse analysis is a qualitative methodology that 'allows for a deeper insight into the meaning conveyed by the text' (Ribera Payá 2019: 32). This step was crucial as it allowed us to identify whether the dominant discourse for each of the topics addressed by each of the parties had a European or a national focus (see Table 3 for indicators).

Table 3. Indicators for European/national dominant discourse (political discourse analysis).

| Indicators for political discourse analysis	
European Dominant Discourse	**National Dominant Discourse**
Reference to European policies (or reforms)	Absence or non-consistency of European references
Reference to European mechanisms (or reforms)	Reference to national general elections' policies
European issues located at the centre of the discourse	Spain (national issues) located at the center of the discourse
-	Salient national issue

Drawing on the theory section (see Ladrech 2002; Reif and Schmitt 1980), the dominant discourse shall be considered European (European approach) if the party addresses European topics and uses references to European policies, mechanisms, institutions or reforms thereof. Conversely, the dominant discourse shall be considered national or domestic (national approach) when the previously stated references to the European project are either absent or non-consistent.[2] Additionally, the discourse would be predominantly national in the case that parties choose to place Spain at the centre of their discourse; if the suggestions they offer were already suggested in the previous national elections (as part of their national agenda and not referring to European policies, mechanisms, institutions or reforms thereof), or if they brought a salient national issue (as acknowledged in the theoretical section, most likely using an identitarian focus, for the right, and a rejection of EU neoliberal guidelines, for the left). Once the longer semantic structures were coded into the topics and given the relatively short length of the materials (240 pages in total), we analysed the dominant discourse – with political discourse analysis – manually. This methodology served to test the two hypotheses in the analysis, which will be organised in blocs according to their ideology in the next section

RESEARCH FINDINGS: THE EUROPEANIZATION OF SPANISH POLITICAL PARTIES

Analysis of the Political Programs by Ideological Blocs

Figure 1 displays an overview of the number of references coded (horizontal axis) regarding the main topics (vertical axis) for all parties' manifestos. Note that other noteworthy topics that shed light on the identification of the dominant discourse were added to the original ones extracted from previous academic research when revising the manifestos.

Figure 1. Nº of references for each topic (challengers and mainstream parties).
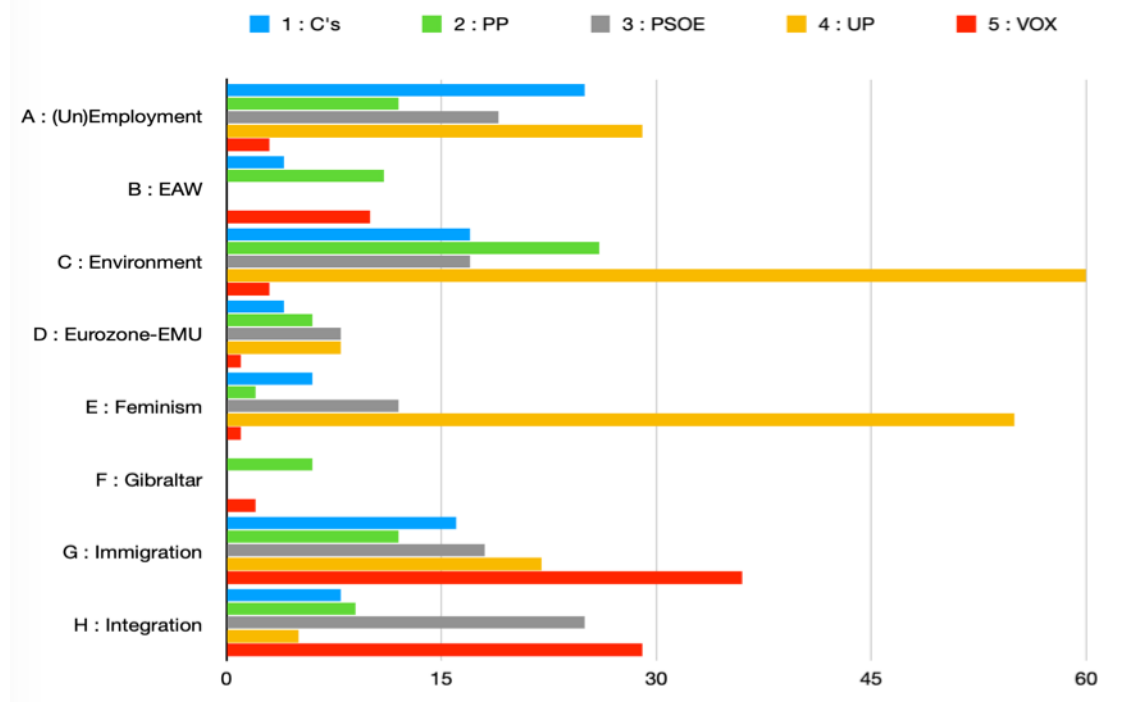
Analysis of the Spanish right-wing parties' political programs

As shown in *Figure 1*, the main topics addressed per party within this bloc are immigration, (un)employment, environment, the EAW (Catalonia), and Gibraltar.

A remarkable initial finding is that the dominant right-wing party, PP, makes a greater use of European references than C's and Vox. In this sense, the mainstream party is innovating more than the challenger parties it is competing with. This is well-exemplified through the topic of (un)employment, where the majority of the references used by the mainstream party concern European mechanisms and place European concerns at the centre. For instance, the party is the 'leading negotiator' on the European Social Fund plus (ESF+), being the 'main instrument that the EU will have to develop measures in education, training, employment and social inclusion, during the period 2021-2027' (PP 2019: 23). Nonetheless, the dominance of European references cannot be found in every topic. When addressing immigration or the environment, the party uses references to European mechanisms or concerns while predominantly dealing with them in a generic manner, bringing national issues or locating Spain at the centre of its discourse. What is interesting is that, even if addressing national concerns, the party also innovates in the articulation of its discourse by means of instrumentalising the European dimension. Using the case of immigration as an example, the party bears in mind the Spanish geographical position

while advocating for its demands in most cases. For example, it pushes for greater European economic cooperation with those African countries whose rate of emigration is high, or argues to increase the provision of resources to FRONTEX in order to better protect European borders (PP 2019: 44-5). These examples show how both dimensions, national and European, are intertwined.

Moving towards a more centred position in the political spectrum, a similar phenomenon occurs for the case of C's. The party would not only be innovating because its discourse contains references to European mechanisms, policies or concerns, but also because it inscribes national concerns within the European context. This is also noticeable when analysing immigration, whereby the number of references with a European and national focus is very balanced. However, concerning the references characterised by a more national focus (in this case, primarily locating Spain at the centre of the discourse), C's - in the same vein as PP - recurrently uses the European dimension. For instance, when pushing for better support for Spain and other countries situated at Europe's external borders regarding migration management (C's 2019: 2-3). This instrumentalisation is also manifest in other topics. While *a priori*, less innovation would be found when addressing (un)employment or the environment (since there are fewer references concerning European mechanism, policies or reforms thereof), this assumption is less evident when one analyses the manner in which national concerns are brought to the fore. For instance, as youth unemployment is one of the main issues that must be tackled at national level (Sanchez-Silva 2019), they suggest the creation of a 'Youth Investment Plan of 10 billion euros' (C's 2019: 3).

It is significant to find that the party situated at the extreme of the right-wing bloc, and also the most competitive challenger party to PP - Vox - appears to be innovating less in their discourse when looking at the number of references per topic. Nonetheless, as one analyses the references that indicate a predominant national discourse, it becomes more obvious that the party is innovating more than it would appear at a first glance. This can be illustrated with the topic of integration or immigration. For instance, regarding the latter, 'bringing to Europe the exigence to strengthen Spanish borders, mainly in Ceuta and Melilla', or regarding asylum, they will 'totally oppose any attempt to impose mandatory quotas from Brussels, to the detriment of our security and sovereignty' (Vox 2019b: 11-14).

Another interesting finding coded while carrying out the analysis revealed that two topics representing a purely national concern – being also a salient topic during national elections (Mazo 2020) – were addressed only by right-wing parties: the Catalonian secessionism (with reference to the European Arrest Warrant, EAW) and Gibraltar. These topics are a straightforward example of how parties are using the European level to push for national demands.

Clad with a nationalist rhetoric, for the case of Catalonia the parties are pushing for the modification of the EAW as a consequence of Carles Puigdemont's flight from Spain. PP claims that it is 'inadmissible' that being the EU a community founded on law, 'the Member States do not recognise certain crimes committed against the integrity and sovereignty of other Member States' and thus, urge its reform to include the crimes of rebellion and sedition (PP 2019: 49). For its part, C's, argues for the reform of the EAW so that extradition is 'automatic and more agile' (C's 2019: 1). Finally, Vox, encompasses both of the previous claims made by PP and C's and argues that the EU has been 'insufficient in the defence of Spanish Unity' (Vox 2019b: 6). It demands a "strict prohibition against launching accession talks with any European territory that has proclaimed its independence outside of the constitutionally established procedure" (Vox 2019b: 8). Accordingly, it pushes for the creation of a Directive that expands the list of crimes

encompassed by the scope of the European Arrest Warrant and reduces the 'delivery times from the executing state to the issuing state to the minimum possible' (Vox 2019b: 15).

Last but not least, Gibraltar is addressed by PP and Vox. While the former party affirms its colonial character and urges the EU to have the same view and defend a Spanish veto power in matters that concern the Rock (PP 2019: 58), the latter addresses it in a more radical manner, calling for the "return" of Gibraltar and stating that "it is unacceptable that there is a tax haven on Spanish sovereign soil" (Vox 2019b: 10).

Analysis of the Spanish left-wing parties' political programs

After presenting the research findings belonging to the right-wing parties, this section will contain the findings regarding the left-wing parties – composed of UP and PSOE. The four most discussed topics for both parties are immigration, (un)employment, the environment, and feminism (see *Figure 1*).

Out of the two parties, PSOE is the one innovating the most. The party includes more references to European policies, mechanisms or concerns in every topic except for (un)employment, which is more balanced. At first sight, UP would be innovating less as, overall, there is a greater national focus in the references analysed except for (un)employment and immigration, which are also more balanced.

Hence, PSOE clearly innovates in its references to immigration and environment as it mostly refers to European issues. Some examples include the reform of the Common European Asylum System (the Dublin regulation) so that it rests on principles of 'responsibility and solidarity' or pushing for a socialist group creation of a 'Green Deal' (PSOE 2019: 17). Now, if one looks at those references contained in the topic (un)employment - which was the exception for containing more references to national concerns compared to other topics - we again find that those national concerns are inscribed within a European dimension. For instance, stemming from their national agenda and being a national concern, they propose the establishment of a 'European Minimum Wage' (which passed at national level recently), a youth guarantee program to fight against youth precariousness, and the democratisation of companies at European level (PSOE 2019: 10-3).

Interestingly, UP also harbours a European dimension when addressing concerns of national salience in their manifesto (in some cases even copying word-for-word their national elections program but engraving it within the European context, which would be the innovative element). This is evident when analysing the topic of the environment. Some examples include: 'halving in 2030 the primary energy production based on fossil fuels to reach 100% of the production from renewable sources in 2040' in Europe (UP 2019a: 63), which can be found in UP's national program (2019b: 12); "a cheaper and fairer electricity bill' – but at the European level – (UP 2019a: 65), which can also be literally found in UP (2019b: 12). This is recurrently done through their manifesto. Remarkably, in the topic of (un)employment, UP also innovates while bringing similar concerns as those addressed by PSOE. For instance, they push for a European 'decent' minimum wage (UP 2019a: 18), which was first brought by UP at the national level (UP 2019b: 78), or the democratisation of companies at the European level (UP 2019a: 19), also copied from their national manifesto, changing only its structure (UP 2019b: 61). It is worth mentioning that the rejection of austerity measures and neoliberal guidelines is recurrent throughout all UP's political program. While there is no single reference in PSOE's manifesto regarding the criticism of the austerity measures, there is one reference against neoliberalism when dealing with (un)employment: 'the most conservative and neoliberal currents advocate maintaining an increasingly deregulated globalisation' (PSOE 2019: 20).

Lastly, another topic was added to the coding system as both left-wing parties referred to it transversally in their political programs: feminism. These two parties are the most explicit advocates for feminism at the national level[3] and they innovate in their European manifestos by addressing this issue vis-á-vis the European project. For example, PSOE defends the same application of the gender perspective it pushes at the national level in areas such as the CAP or the cohesion policy, which have a significant budget (PSOE 2019: 14-6). On its part, UP undergoes a similar path when suggesting a European initiative that pursues the 'decommodification and nationalisation' of goods and services necessary to guarantee human rights, and which cannot be provided only within the 'family environment and at the expense of female labour' (UP 2019a: 28). Another example is the defence of a 'sustainable and feminist urbanism', pursued not only at national level, but at European level too (UP 2019a: 82).

Towards a Twilight Zone?

The analysis presented above shows how domestic and European politics are intertwined, as much as the fact that Spanish political parties attempted to Europeanize national politics. Looking at the two indicators extracted from the literature on the Europeanization of parties (Ladrech 2002: 396-98), one can see how the programmatic content indicates a greater utilisation of EU references as 'a factor in domestic policy pursuits'[4] and a change in strategy regarding certain parties that are more critical with the EU. The latter is especially noticeable when one looks at how an initially more Eurosceptic party such as Vox, is now actually calling for an extension of competences of the EU, in this case through the EAW. This finding is also consistent with Hix and Goetz's (2000: 12) work on Europeanization: the potential for change at the national level can occur as the European arena provides a new 'structure of opportunities' that political parties can use. Hence, parties are not only innovating when they address a European mechanism, reform, or concern, but also when they inscribe a national concern, or a salient issue, within the bigger European picture.

After analysing the empirical data, one wonders whether the traditional classification of first and second-order elections is well-equipped to give account of the contemporary politicised context. If the references related to the two indicator sets (dominant European discourse and national dominant discourse) were applied *stricto sensu,* all the nuanced findings concerning how national concerns are Europeanised would have been lost. Such a finding is confirmed by the existing literature, suggesting a continuum in the election-orderness categorisation (see Hough and Jeffery 2005; Elgie and Fauvelle-Aymar 2012). In this vein, it would appear as if PSOE was the only party who really contributed to the Europeanization of the debate, as it is the only party whose dominant discourse is European. While the other parties sometimes harbour a balanced number of references for some topics, the majority of parties predominantly bring national issues, put Spain at the centre of the discourse or bring suggestions from the national agenda. However, they also innovate when addressing these issues, in most cases, by instrumentalising the European arena to push for their national demands. It is the case for all challenger parties and, to a lesser extent – as it does use a relatively greater number of references to European mechanisms and reforms – for PP.

In this context, while the hypotheses outlined in this article were essential for the authors to guide the research, the main findings point to a different direction. Even if one could have the impression that the 2019 EP elections in Spain were dominated overall by a national approach – thus leading towards a second-order election - this would account for a superficial analysis, as it would ignore how parties intended to Europeanise national issues as a consequence of party competition.

Rather than stating that the national order can be understood isolated from the European, we argue that the intertwining of national and European politics demands a new conceptualisation capable of capturing all the aforementioned nuances. In this regard, we conceived a 'twilight zone' that sits in-between the traditional election-orders classification and is characterised by the synergy of the following elements: (1) a domestic or national concern (contributing to second-orderness) and (2) the intention of the given party to address the said concern using the European arena or making reference to a European mechanism, policy or reform (contributing to first-orderness) for political gain.

Interestingly, our findings also indicate that it is mainstream parties who are leading the way in terms of 'innovation' in their discourse. The Spanish mainstream parties' innovativeness can be explained on the basis of (1) the increased pressure posed by challenger parties after the national elections of April 2019 and (2) the superior innovative capacity that traditional pro-EU parties have on a European political agenda. With the exception of UP, C's and Vox substantially increased their seats in the national parliament during the April elections. Vox particularly increased its share of Members of Parliament (MPs) from 0 in 2016 to 24 in April 2019, which is why one of the main topics exploited by the left for the November 2019 elections' campaign was the 'fear of the far right' (an election in which Vox succeeded to get 52 MPs). In this regard, traditional parties have shown a certain degree of political adaptability. Additionally, it must be noted that over time, Spanish mainstream parties have undergone a process of Europeanization that reflects the positive views of the electorate towards the European project (see, for example, Pardo 2012), rendering them more competitive and able to innovate on European issues.

CONCLUSION

The article departed from the following research question: 'how have Spanish parties addressed topics in their political programs for the 2019 European Parliament elections?' Thus, the article aimed at identifying the dominant discourse of the five main Spanish parties in the EU elections.

Our findings indicate that the distinction between a predominantly national or a predominantly European discourse, is not a straightforward exercise. While analysing the discourse of the parties in their European elections' manifestos, we found that most nuances pointing at an intertwining of national and European dimensions would have been unacknowledged if the traditional classification of first and second-order elections was strictly applied. In this sense, we realised that neither of the hypotheses could be verified in isolation, with results indicating an intertwining of indicators in most cases. Excluding the centre-left PSOE and to a lesser extent the centre-right PP (due to their political adaptability and greater innovative capacity on European issues), the vast majority of the analysed references concerning the other parties had a predominant national focus, yet with a European dimension in most cases. The parties were innovating in their discourse as they were instrumentalising the European dimension or arena to push for their national demands. The examples of Catalonia, immigration or Gibraltar for the right, or the European Minimum Wage or feminism, for the left-wing parties, illustrate this intertwining and the intention to Europeanize national concerns. In the current political context, national politics are hardly grasped when isolated from European politics. It is hence necessary to question the traditional classification of election-orderness as to capture the changing dynamics and the Europeanization of political parties. Departing from the analysis of the 2019 EP elections in Spain, we conceive a "twilight zone" where the majority of the references are inscribed. In this way, the distinction between first and second-order elections may be seen less as a binary distinction and more as part of a continuum.

While it is worth noting that future studies could benefit from including the role of the media – as another key actor in the electoral cycle affecting the voter's decisions – in their analysis, the present article underlined the vital importance of taking a top-down approach when analysing election-orderness. The study of political programs and parties offers nuanced findings that can complement and further explain bottom-up results – ultimately, the electoral cycle is mostly driven by political parties' strategies seeking governmental power. Therefore, following up on our research findings, we encourage further research to analyse how Europeanization, innovation and the conceptualisation of the "twilight zone" may also apply to other European country cases in the context of the 2019 EP elections and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Particularly, the manifesto of C's, was available online embedded on their official website, and not in a PDF form. Consequently, we created a PDF comprised of all the available information following the same order displayed on their website.

[2] In this context, note that non-consistent references relate to those references that merely use the word "European" or refer to a mechanism in a generic manner.

[3] The fact that feminism is at the core of UP's national discourse is noticeable when one looks at their name: the adjective "unidas" means "united" but for females, "unidos" would be the word comprising both genders. Additionally, the rejection to austerity measures and neoliberal guidelines is recurrent throughout all the political programs.

[4] Especially in contrast to the 2014 elections, where the European debate was close to absent.

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