

Political pluralism during the electoral cycle of the period 2003-2004

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- *This article analyses political pluralism during the electoral cycle of the period 2003-2004. This cycle comprises the municipal elections in 2003, elections to the Catalan parliament in 2003, the general elections in 2004 and the European elections in 2004. This period was marked to a large extent by divergence of opinion concerning the application of electoral blocks, either as pieces of a specific duration or as proportional schedules. This became the main theme, covered in the text below. Firstly, the article looks at trends in speaking time for governments involved in the elections during the year of the electoral contest. It then studies the coverage given by news programmes to political news items during the electoral periods. Finally, it analyses the incidence of the different systems of electoral blocks in terms of party representation and the function of blocks as guarantees of political pluralism.*

Keywords

Elections, electoral cycle, campaign, pre-campaign, electoral blocks, news broadcasts, political pluralism, political news items, government, Catalonia, Spain

Electoral cycles and speaking time of the governments involved in the elections

An analysis of trends in speaking time of the Catalan and Spanish governments throughout the year when their corresponding elections took place (2003 and 2004, respectively) focuses on the news broadcasts of TV3, TVE in Catalonia, BTV and Citytv during the electoral campaign, the electoral period and the complete year in question. Due to a lack of comparable data, the case of Localia has been omitted.

Table 1 refers to 2003, the year of elections to the Catalan parliament. It can be observed that the percentage speaking time of the Catalan government compared with the speaking time of all political agents is higher than during the period and the electoral campaign, on all channels. In descending order, there are the percentages for the 55 days of the electoral period and, finally, those for the 15 days of electoral campaign. In this respect, the data show a significant decrease in government news time during the campaign.

If we take into account the two channels with national coverage, the Catalan government speaking time has higher values on TV3 than on TVE in Catalonia in the three periods analysed. With regard to the channels with local coverage, higher values are observed for government speaking time on BTV during the electoral campaign, and on Citytv during the electoral period and for the annual figure. However, and taking into account the short nature of the news broadcasts on Citytv, this last comparison should be treated with some reserve.

The second table refers to 2004, the year in which general elections were held. The percentage of speaking time of the Spanish government compared with the speaking time of political agents is very similar, both in the electoral period and in the year as a whole. Following the trend observed in

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Table 1. Percentage of speaking time for the Catalan government compared with the speaking time for political agents. 2003

Period	TV3	TVE in Catalonia	BTV	Citytv
Electoral period 23 September-16 November	11.1	9.6	8.1	5.5
Electoral campaign 31 October-14 November	4.7	1.2	2.3	0.0
2003	14.3	12.2	9.5	18.4

Source: in-house.

Table 2. Percentage of speaking time of the Spanish government compared with the speaking time of political agents. 2004

Period	TV3	TVE in Catalonia	BTV	Citytv
Electoral period 20 January-14 March	14.8	15.1	9.2	30.3
Electoral campaign 27 February-10 March	5.7	3.7	2.9	100.0
2004	15.0	14.9	10.8	32.6

Source: in-house.

table 1, the percentages for the annual figure are higher than those for the electoral period. The only exception is on TVE in Catalonia: the percentage of government speaking time during the electoral period is 15.1%, while that for 2004 is 14.9%. A horizontal analysis of the table reveals that the lowest percentages of government speaking time are concentrated during the electoral campaign. Citytv is the only exception here, although the 100% obtained refers, in absolute terms, to only 14 seconds.

With regard to the channels, a comparison between the two channels with national coverage shows very similar values, particularly in the annual figure and during the electoral period (around 15% in both cases). A comparative analysis of the local channels, for their part, shows higher values on Citytv compared with BTV in all periods. However, when interpreting these data it should be remembered that the news broadcasts on Citytv are short.

In summary, the case studies analysed show that electoral cycles involve, in general terms, a reduction in the speaking time of the governments involved in the elections compared

with the annual period in question. Although this fall is seen to be moderate during the electoral period, which consists of the day of the election and the 54 previous days, it becomes much sharper during the 15 days of the electoral campaign per se. Comparing the tables we can also conclude that, during 2004, the percentage government speaking time is higher than that in 2003 for all channels and periods analysed.

Trends in news coverage of political news items during electoral periods

The study of news coverage given to political news items focuses on electoral periods and the period during the month prior to and after elections. Moreover, political news items are measured in relation to the rest of the thematic indicators for each period analysed. With regard to the sample, the data for Citytv must be interpreted with some reserve, given the brief nature of its news broadcasts.

Table 3 refers to the municipal elections. All the channels coincide in giving the highest percentage to political news items during the electoral campaign. Apart from this similarity, the channels do not appear to be homogeneous. While on TV3 the next period with most political news items in percentage terms is the month after the elections, on TVE in Catalonia this is in the month prior to the pre-campaign and, on BTV, the pre-campaign itself. As a consequence of the lack of data regarding Citytv, a comparison has not been made with this channel. Analysed by rows, however, it can

be seen that BTV has, for all periods analysed, the highest percentages of political news items, while TV3 has the lowest.

With regard to the elections to the Catalan parliament in 2003, table 2 shows that the electoral campaign and the month after the election are, respectively, the periods with the highest percentage of political news items on all channels. On TV3 and BTV, in descending order, the next periods are the pre-electoral campaign and, finally, the month prior to the pre-campaign. On the other hand, TVE in

Table 3. Municipal elections 2003. Percentage time for political news items in relation to the time for the rest of the thematic indicators

Period	Dates	TV3	TVE in Catalonia	BTV	Citytv
Month prior to the pre - campaign	28 February - 31 March	13.7	20.9	21.1	13.3
Electoral period	1 April - 8 May	11.5	14.1	22.7	8.6
Electoral campaign	9 May - 23 May	32.0	39.0	46.4	no data
Month after the elections	26 May - 26 June	20.1	20.4	21.4	no data

Source: in-house.

Table 4. Elections to the Catalan parliament in 2003. Percentage of time dedicated to political news items in relation to the time dedicated to the rest of the thematic indicators

Period	Dates	TV3	TVE in Catalonia	BTV	Citytv
Month prior to the pre - campaign	22 August-22 September	16.4	17.9	18.7	12.7
Electoral period ¹	23 September -30 October	17.4	15.7	23.9	11.4
Electoral campaign	31 October -14 November	25.8	34.3	37.5	27.9
Month after the elections	17 November -17 December	24.2	25.5	28.2	24.9

Source: in-house.

¹ For this and the rest of the tables, the electoral period refers to 38 of the 55 days established according to current regulations, as the 15 days for the electoral campaign are not included, nor is the "day of reflection" or the day of the elections. In the text, the term *pre-electoral campaign* is used to simplify this explanation.

Catalonia and Citytv invert this order regarding both periods. BTV remains the channel dedicating the highest percentage time to political news items in all periods analysed. TV3 continues to be the channel that dedicates least time in relative terms, with the exception of TVE in Catalonia during the pre-electoral campaign.

From the table on the general elections in 2004 we can see that TVE in Catalonia and BTV continue the same line in terms of percentage orders for political news items. In this respect, both channels coincide with their highest percentages during the electoral campaign, followed by the pre-electoral campaign, the month after the elections and the month prior to the pre-campaign. TV3 also dedicates most percentage time to political news items during the campaign and pre-electoral campaign, while it has practically identical

values during non-electoral periods. Unlike the situation in the parliamentary and, in some cases municipal elections, news coverage during the pre-campaign period for the general elections is the second highest in percentage terms for political news items. Citytv, on the other hand, is an exception to the trend seen in all elections, as it is the only channel that has its lowest percentage of political news items during the electoral campaign. A horizontal analysis once again shows that BTV's news broadcasts are those that dedicate most time to political news items.

Finally, the table on the European elections in 2004 shows that both TVE in Catalonia and BTV have their highest percentages of political news items during the electoral campaign and the lowest during the pre-campaign. TV3 coincides in terms of the period with the highest percentage

Table 5. General elections in 2004. Percentage time dedicated to political news items in relation to the time dedicated to the rest of the thematic indicators

Period	Dates	TV3	TVE in Catalonia	BTV	Citytv
Month prior to the pre - campaign	19 December-19 January	17.9	17.5	20.9	15.3
Electoral period	20 January -26 February	23.3	22.7	29.9	23.3
Electoral campaign	27 February -10 March	27.4	37.2	37.9	13.0
Month after the elections	15 March-15 April	17.8	20.5	24.8	17.0

Source: in-house.

Table 6. European elections in 2004. Percentage of time dedicated to political news items in relation to the time dedicated to the rest of the thematic indicators

Period	Dates	TV3	TVE in Catalonia	BTV	Citytv
Month prior to the pre - campaign	19 March-19 April	17.7	21.3	23.5	19.5
Electoral period	20 April-27 May	17.8	17.6	22.9	19.0
Electoral campaign	28 May-11 June	27.0	36.4	37.4	13.0
Month after the elections	14 June-14 July	21.9	24.1	24.2	24.7

Source: in-house.

of political news items, but in this case the month prior to the pre-campaign is in the last position. Similar to the immediately preceding elections, Citytv dedicates the least time to political news items during the campaign period. The leadership of BTV's news broadcasts with regard to the most time dedicated to political news items is replaced, but only during the month after the elections, by Citytv.

An analysis of the news coverage for political news items during electoral periods shows that the electoral campaign is, in general terms and for obvious reasons, the period with the highest percentage of political news items in relation to the rest of the thematic indicators. The resulting average, calculated for the four elections analysed, is over 30%. The second highest overall average corresponds to the month after the elections (22.7%), followed by the pre-electoral campaign (18.9%). The month prior to the pre-campaign has the lowest overall average (18%). However, the trend observed during general elections shows the pre-electoral campaign with the second highest level in terms of percentage for political news items. One possible explanation could be the fact that, within the context of general elections characterised by a strong two-party system, news coverage tends to focus more on the period prior to elections than in the subsequent period, when the results are decided and there is no possibility of pacts. In 5 out of the 16 cases presented, 4 per election, the most repeated order in percentage terms, in descending order, is as follows: electoral campaign, month after the elections, month prior to the pre-campaign and pre-electoral campaign. With regard to a specific analysis by channel, BTV appears as the channel that dedicates most percentage time to political news items, with values over 37%, this figure even approaching 50% for municipal elections.

The representation of political parties according to the different systems of electoral blocks

During the period analysed, the CCRTV Board of Governors (Catalan Radio and Television Corporation) approved and applied two systems of electoral blocks. Below is a comparison of the incidence of these two models regarding the representation of each party. Specifically, TV3's coverage is studied for the 2003-2004 electoral cycle.

One of the two systems of electoral blocks was applied to the municipal elections (May 2003), to the elections to the Catalan parliament (November 2003) and to the general elections (March 2004). This system is based on the broadcasting of items of a specific duration and of an established order in the news broadcasts of public radio and television channels. The extension and order of the news vary according to the representation obtained by the parties in the previous elections at the same level. Journalists demonstrated their rejection of this system in various ways, such as their refusal to put their names to the news stories and an official letter signed by the public media professionals. The general elections were preceded by the decision of the CCRTV Board of Governors to introduce more flexible criteria in news broadcasts for the electoral blocks. According to this agreement, the aim was for a *time correction* to guarantee those political forces with less representation a minimum amount of time to ensure their electoral programmes were better publicised. The editors were also left to decide the order of political formations in the electoral blocks. The Central Electoral Board, however, ruled against this agreement, accepting an appeal brought by a political party. This meant that, once again, TVC had to apply the block system, and strictly.

Shortly before the European elections (June 2004), the CCRTV Board of Governors approved new criteria for covering the electoral process. The aim of this agreement was to make professional criteria compatible with a weighted presence of all political forces. Scales of proportionality were established and no pre-established order was laid down.

Consequently, the CCRTV's criteria for coverage may be divided into two groups:

- Group 1: municipal, parliament and general elections. A fixed broadcast order is set for the blocks and a fixed percentage of time for each political formation. Both parameters are directly proportional, although not strictly so, to the electoral results for each formation in the last elections at the same level.
- Group 2: European elections. No broadcast order is set for the blocks and the broadcast time is calculated based on the time for the formation with the least electoral weight. The categories of *medium parties* and *large parties* are created.

Table 7. TV3. Duration of the electoral blocks

Elections	News broadcast	Established duration	Real duration	Deviation
Municipal elections	TN midday / TN evening	02:40:00	04:08:37	+01:28:37
Parliament elections	TN midday / TN evening	03:30:00	03:50:02	+00:20:02
General elections (up to 3/3/04)	TN midday / TN evening	01:18:00	01:41:02	+00:23:02
General elections (up to 4/3/04)	TN midday / TN evening	01:35:40	01:46:41	+00:11:01

Source: in-house.

Table 8. TV3. Summary of news time (%)

Candidature	Municipal elections			Elections to the Parliament of Catalonia			General elections (up to 3/3/04) ²			General elections (as from 4/3/04)		
	Cover criteria (%)	News time (%)	Deviation (%)	Cover criteria (%)	News time (%)	Deviation (%)	Cover criteria (%)	News time (%)	Deviation (%)	Cover criteria (%)	News time (%)	Deviation (%)
PSC ³	31.2	30.3	-0.9	36.2	35.0	-1.2	29.5	28.8	-0.7	29.3	29.1	-0.2
CiU	26.6	26.7	0.1	35.5	35.7	0.2	25.6	26.1	0.5	28.0	28.4	0.4
PPC ⁴	17.2	16.0	-1.2	11.0	11.2	0.2	21.8	21.7	-0.1	23.2	23.3	0.1
ICV-EA ⁵	12.5	14.4	1.9	7.1	7.7	0.6	11.5	11.9	0.4	9.8	9.7	-0.1
ERC	12.5	12.6	0.1	10.2	10.4	0.2	11.5	11.6	0.1	9.8	9.5	-0.3

Source: in-house.

- 2 Both columns on the general elections are based on the two models of cover applied, before (up to 3/3/04) and after (as from 4/3/04) the ruling by the Central Electoral Board.
- 3 For the elections to the Catalan parliament, the candidature is PSC-CpC. For the general elections, it's PSC+PSOE.
- 4 For the general elections, the candidature is PPC+PP.
- 5 For the general elections, the candidature is ICV-EUiA+IU.

Table 9. TV3. Summary of news time during the European elections

Candidature	Coverage criteria		Real data		
	Band (proportion)	Band (time)	Proportion	Duration	Compared with criteria
PSC+PSOE	2.2-2.5	00:45:43-00:51:58	2.0	00:41:53	Less than band
CiU+Galeusca	2.2-2.5	00:45:43-00:51:58	2.0	00:42:14	Less than band
PPC+PP	1.5-1.8	00:31:10-00:37:25	1.4	00:29:13	Less than band
ERC+EdP	1.5-1.8	00:31:10-00:37:25	1.4	00:29:03	Less than band
ICV-EUiA+IU	1	00:20:47	1.0	00:20:47	-

Source: in-house.

Below we analyse the application of the two block models. In any case, although the application of the blocks is based on criteria of duration and order of appearance, this analysis refers only to the time for each political formation.

With regard to the elections of group 1, the news time of the electoral blocks on TV3 is higher than that determined by the pre-established criteria. In general, the percentage assigned to each formation is respected throughout the whole electoral campaign. With regard to the quota for each party, it can be seen that the PSC is always below the assigned percentage; CiU, on the other hand, is always above the assigned percentage. Another figure we can see from the analysis is that the two parties with the least news time, ERC and ICV-EA, are above the assigned percentage in all cases except during the general election period after the ruling by the Central Electoral Board.

The percentage of the party with the least news time compared with the party with the most news time varies depending on the elections. In the municipal elections and during the first period of the general elections, the news time for the PSC is 2.5 times higher than for ERC. During the second period of the general elections, this proportion reaches 3 for the same parties. It can therefore be deduced that the correction imposed by the Central Electoral Board regarding coverage criteria means that the gap between the parties with the highest and lowest news time has widened. We can see the highest proportion in the elections to the Catalan parliament, where news time for CiU is 4.5 times higher than for ICV-EA.

With regard to the elections for group 2 (European), the news time recorded on TV3 for each political formation is, in all cases, lower than the band established by the coverage criteria. The proportion of the party with the least news time (ICV-EUiA+IU) compared to the party with the most news time (CiU+Galeusca) stands at 2. The proportional band ranges from 2.2 to 2.5.

In short, a comparison between the election practices of group 1 (percentages) and those of group 2 (proportions) show that an application of the proportional schedule entails less proportional distance between those parties with the most and the least news time.

Replacing the percentage of time fixed for each party by a proportion creates three groups of parties with almost identical time for each group, in spite of the fact that these criteria do not specify an exact proportion but rather a band. The distance, in real time, between large parties (CiU and PSC) is 0.8% and the distance between medium parties (ERC and PPC) is 0.6%.

On the other hand, the distance between the party with the least real news time and the next totals, in the European elections, the maximum value of the whole of the processes: 39.8% (ICV-EUiA+IU and ERC+EdP). In the municipal elections, this percentage is 14.3% (ERC and ICV-EA); in the parliamentary elections it's 35.1% (ICV-EA and ERC); in the first period of the general elections it's 2.6% (ERC and ICV-EUiA+IU); and in the second period of the general elections it's 2.1% (ERC and ICV-EUiA+IU).

Therefore, in this case, a comparison between the election

practices of group 1 (percentages) and those of group 2 (proportions) implies the greatest distance of all the processes between the two parties with the least news time.

An analysis of the four elections has allowed us to draw other conclusions, apart from these implications for block models in terms of party representation. Firstly, the real duration of electoral blocks is higher than the established duration in all cases. This practice can be interpreted as a way of enabling news to be broadcast with a reasonable duration for those parties with less assigned time, as well as better diffusion of the electoral programmes of all formations, without violating the proportions deriving from the news coverage criteria.

Finally, and in relation to the correction imposed by the Central Electoral Board during the general elections, two observations can be made. Firstly, this has increased the gap between those parties with the least and the most speaking time (the proportion goes from 2.5 to 3). Secondly, those parties with the least news time are at a disadvantage, as the deviation from the party quota goes from positive to negative.

Do electoral blocks guarantee pluralism?

In an attempt to discover the implications of electoral blocks for specific elections with regard to pluralism, observed over a longer period of time, we have taken as our sample the midday and evening news broadcasts of the national channels, TV3 and TVE in Catalonia.

With regard to TV3, we should take into account the fact that, as we have already mentioned, the criteria agreed in terms of allocating time and the order of appearance of each political formation by the CCRTV Board of Governors for the coverage of the general elections were rectified shortly afterwards by the Central Electoral Board. The electoral blocks have therefore been analysed in two parts: up to 3 March and between 4 and 10 March. This second period starts with the ruling of the Central Electoral and ends when the electoral campaign ends, immediately before the terrorist attacks in Madrid.

The CCRTV agreed that representation in previous elections would be the key to determining the time allocated to the different political groups. It also established a correction

of the time or a minimum appearance time to prevent smaller parties from being at a disadvantage. The electoral campaign was to be monitored throughout the state of Spain.

With regard to the coverage plan for the territorial programming of TVE, approved by RTVE's Board of Governors, it was established that the time dedicated to news on the electoral campaign for each party would be distributed according to their representation in the previous Spanish parliamentary elections in the territorial area of the autonomous community, in this case Catalonia. News time was assigned to all formations that had obtained at least 1% of the votes in the 2000 elections. With regard to IC-V-EUiA and ERC, according to RTVE's criteria, 18 spaces had to be broadcast for each one (9 on TVE1 and 9 on La 2) throughout the campaign.

Tables 10 and 11 compare the percentages given by the coverage criteria, the news time during the campaign and speaking time in all news broadcasts throughout the period 2003-2005, and on the two channels analysed. As has been shown in previous studies, the news and speaking time are comparable concepts, although they are not strictly equivalent.

These data allow us to reflect on the role of electoral blocks in terms of guaranteeing pluralism. Firstly, it can be seen that the coverage criteria established by the Boards of Governors of CCRTV and RTVE are respected, and very clearly, by the two channels during the electoral campaign. The most outstanding piece of data, however, comes from comparing these data with the speaking time of the political formations for the period 2003-2005. This comparison shows similarities in the order of percentages, in spite of the exception of second and third place. So while CiU and PPC+PP are the second and third party during the general election campaign, this order is inverted when we count the overall speaking time for the three years of the period in question. The fact that PP is the main party in opposition in Spain for more than half the sample could be the reason behind this alteration.

With regard to the order of the political formations, we should also note the coincidence between the order of the speaking time for the years 2003-2005 and the order of these formations in the Spanish parliament after the 2004 general elections: PSC+PSOE, PPC+PP, CiU, ERC and ICV-EUiA+IU.

Another observation is that, on both channels and for the overall calculation of the three years for the period in ques-

Table 10. TV3. Table-summary. News time given by the coverage criteria and real time during the general election campaign. Speaking time for the period 2003-2005

Candidature	% coverage criteria		% news time		% speaking time 2003-2005
	General elections (to 3/3/04) ⁶	General elections (from 4/3/04)	General elections (to 3/3/04)	General elections (from 4/3/04)	
<i>PSC+PSOE</i>	29.5	29.3	28.8	29.1	28.4
<i>CiU</i>	25.6	28.0	26.1	28.4	23.0
<i>PPC+PP</i>	21.8	23.2	21.7	23.3	24.3
<i>ERC</i>	11.5	9.8	11.6	9.5	14.3
<i>ICV-EUiA+IU</i>	11.5	9.8	11.9	9.7	10.0

Source: in-house.

Table 11. TVE in Catalonia. Table-summary. News time given by the coverage criteria and real time during the general election campaign. Speaking time for the period 2003-2005

Candidature	% coverage criteria	% news time. General elections	% speaking time 2003-2005
<i>PSC+PSOE</i>	33.3	34.8	28.1
<i>CiU</i>	28.0	29.4	24.3
<i>PPC+PP</i>	22.7	24.4	25.7
<i>ERC</i>	5.5 ⁷	5.6	13.4
<i>ICV-EUiA+IU</i>	5.5 ⁸	5.4	8.6

Source: in-house.

6 The two columns for the general elections follow the two coverage models applied, before (to 3/3/04) and after (from 4/3/04) the Ruling by the Central Electoral Board.

7 Taking into consideration the 18 spaces given by the coverage criteria, the 8.0% planned for each electoral block with the presence of ICV-EUiA becomes 5.5% for the whole of the electoral campaign.

8 Taking into consideration the 18 spaces given by the coverage criteria, the 8.0% planned for each electoral block with the presence of ERC becomes 5.5% for the whole of the electoral campaign.

Table 12. TV3. Speaking time for the PP and PSOE compared with speaking time for the grouped political parties from Catalan and Spain. Years 2003 and 2005

Candidature	2003	2005
<i>PP</i>	9.1%	19.0 %
PSOE	13.9 %	10.2 %

Source: in-house.

Table 13. TVE in Catalonia. Speaking time for the PP and PSOE compared with speaking time for the grouped political parties from Catalan and Spain. Years 2003 and 2005 (%)

Candidature	2003	2005
<i>PP</i>	4.6%	19.0%
PSOE	9.3%	9.6%

Source: in-house.

years analysed. In this respect, we should also take into account the time recorded for the party in government, not as a specific political formation but as the government. On the other hand, a significant difference can be seen in the breadth of the ranges. The distance between one party and another is more acute during 2005 than during 2003. A study of the content of news items for each party would help to interpret these data more accurately, as we would then have information on the implicit connotations. However, this task goes beyond the objectives of this article.

The data analysed, based on the study of a specific case, do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions on the need for electoral blocks to guarantee pluralism. Although electoral blocks very clearly distribute the presence of political formations according to their representation, this situation is not very different outside electoral campaigns, at least not during the period 2003-2005. The lack of data on whether the absence of electoral blocks would lead to a substantial change in the quotas of time for different formations prevents us from drawing more in-depth conclusions in this respect.