

**55th ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION
ASSOCIATION May 26-30**

**PANEL TITLE: COMMUNICATION AND TERRORISM: SOME
LESSONS FROM THE MARCH 11 MADRID BOMBINGS**

**Paper title: Examining the Spanish Public Agenda, Personal Agenda
and 'Impact Area' between March 11 - 14, 2004**

Professor Fermín Bouza, Universidad Complutense, Madrid (Spain)
bouza@ccinf.ucm.es

Dr Raquel Rodríguez, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid (Spain)
raquel.rodriquez@urjc.es

ABSTRACT: The March 11 bombings impacted significantly on the March 14 Spanish general elections and changed the models of voting behaviour. We examine the evolution of the public and personal agendas in Spain while at the same time showing the impact area of political communication during the period prior to March 11 to March 14.

During the time of the previous Spanish government (2000 – 2004), we studied the trajectory of the most important problems affecting Spanish society and the views of the public on the main political events of this period. The research employs public opinion data to analyse and compare issues and positions on the personal and public agendas. The study compares and contrasts significant differences between both the personal and public agendas to help explain the distances, if they exist, between the public and personal spheres. This process allows us to establish an 'impact area' among the issues considered most relevant. The research allows us to track the incorporation of new items into the agendas and their level of importance in a time frame leading up to the pre-electoral data, just a few days before the attacks. This allows us to begin to explain the evolution of subsequent events after the March 11 Madrid bombings.

KEYWORDS: Public Agenda, Personal Agenda, Agenda-Setting, Elections and Spain

1.- Electoral Process

The paper we are presenting is part of a developing interdisciplinary research project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and focused on electoral behavior. The results that we are advancing are only a very small part of ongoing research that will be completed with aspects linked to political science, the agenda of the communications media, and the demoscopic analysis of the evolution of Spanish people's vote during recent legislatures. Here we will focus on some of the aspects to take into account in order to understand the context in which the Spanish general elections of March 14, 2004 unfolded. Elections that were affected by the eruption and commotion of the March 11 terrorist attacks in the city of Madrid.

The study begins with the analysis of the issues that the Spanish people considered most important for the country starting in the month of September, 2000, coinciding with the first year of the *Partido Popular's* (PP) second legislature with José María Aznar as president. We will group these issues together as the *public agenda* and we will see how these issues, considered by public opinion to be the most important problems during the *PP* government's last legislature, evolved. We will add to the analysis what we call the *personal agenda*, that is, the issues (problems) that worry citizens most in relation to themselves. From this perspective, we are placing this paper in the framework of the study of citizens' agendas, both public and personal, approaching some of the typical issues of the *Agenda Setting Theory* focus (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

At the beginning of the legislature (2000), the *Partido Popular* (PP) governed with an absolute majority; as time went on, the distance between the PP and its main rival in the opposition, the *Partido Socialista* (PSOE), lessened, reaching a difference in *direct* vote intention of 3.4% with respect

to the PSOE in the month of January-February (pre-electoral study *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*–CIS¹). Only days before the elections and the terrorist attacks, the polls gave different results for the *direct* or *estimated* vote intention: Noxa (a company near to the PSOE but working for the daily newspaper *La Vanguardia*, which is rather conservative) forecast a PP victory by a margin of 2.2%² (41.4% - 39.2%) of the *estimated* vote intention in contrast with other demoscopic companies that gave a broader *estimated* vote intention (between 5 and 9.5 percentage points). Noxa's *direct* vote intention was 31.2% for the PP and 30.9% for the PSOE. That is, the *direct* vote intention showed a much lower difference (CIS –January/February: 3.4; Noxa –March: 0.3) than the *estimated* vote intention. We should add that (the data follows) the company TNS-Demoscopia (closer to conservative media, such as the daily newspaper *ABC*, for which it did electoral polls) gave a difference in *direct* vote intention in favor of the PSOE (March 10, the eve of the bombings) of 1% (23.9% for the PP and 24.9% for the PSOE). These data indicate the magnitude of the problem of attempting to reconstruct the demoscopic dynamics of these days. But we can talk about communication and communication management.

During the 2000-2004 legislature, different issues gained relevance and became present as problems for the citizens, serving to measure the various policies that the executive branch adopted to resolve them. The increased precariousness of employment, a general strike, immigration, and crime are some of the issues that affected the PP most during the last period. Additionally, there were the issues of Spain's implication in the war of Iraq, with strong citizen opposition, a dizzying increase in the price of housing, and the ecologic disaster of the oil tanker *Prestige*. The

¹ Study Num. 2,555, January-February 2004

² *La Vanguardia*, March 7, 2004

supporting pillars of the PP government were a certain stabilization in the State treasury, the decrease in unemployment, and the fight against terrorism, with the weakening of ETA. In the context of this political-electoral situation, we will present the evolution of the important issues as perceived by the public, understood above all as the voting public, presenting it under the subtitles of the public and personal agendas.

2.- The Issues that Worried Spanish Citizens Most, 2000-2004

The data given in the two agendas analyzed come from tracking the different issues throughout the legislature in the CIS barometers (September 2000 – May 2004). In *Agenda-Setting* studies, *Public Agenda* is the response that survey subjects give to the survey question that is formulated as follows in Spain (CIS): *To begin with, in your opinion, what are the three main problems that exist at present in Spain? (Spontaneous response). (Multi-response: maximum of three answers).* Similarly, we give the name *Personal Agenda* (or *Public-Personal Agenda*) (Bouza, 2004) to the response that survey subjects give to the survey question that is formulated as follows in Spain (CIS): *Which three problems personally affect you most? (Spontaneous response). (Multi-response: maximum of three answers).*

As shown in Graph 1, unemployment and terrorism have been the star issues on the public agenda, always having the most outstanding percentages and never losing their position in first or second place. When unemployment has held first place (much oftener than terrorism), terrorism has been in second place, and viceversa, according to the events of the moment. Therefore, unemployment has been, by far, the issue that has most worried Spanish citizens.

Unemployment's and terrorism's domination of the public agenda has only left third place for other issues to dispute. In this third place, we find a much higher fluctuation of issues and relevance, with reference to the percentage of these issues. As Graph 1 shows, the problems with greater presence and continuity on the agenda, with the exception of unemployment and terrorism, have been crime, immigration, housing, and economic problems. In September 2000, both crime and immigration are somewhat present on the agenda, with percentages of 11% and 6.7% respectively; in February 2004, they had doubled and crime was at 22.9% (third place) and immigration at 13.9%. Similarly, housing gains presence and positions on the agenda as the legislature unfolds. In September 2000, housing begins at 3%, taking the coveted third place in March 2004 with 21.8%, after the attacks. Likewise, the economic problems (stated thus, as "economic problems" because they also exist in other forms such as unemployment, etc.) appear as a more constant issue on the agenda, in addition to having a strong percentage presence throughout these four years.

While this was happening on the public agenda, other things were happening on the personal agenda and other issues were the most worrying, although we will focus only on unemployment, terrorism, housing, and economic problems (see Graph 5), as these were the issues that stood out most on both the public and private agendas in the months before the elections. As Graph 3 shows, the percentages achieved on the personal agenda are lower because they are linked to a different distribution than on the public agenda; this does not, however, affect the rankings, positions, or places shown in this paper.

On the personal agenda, we can see how unemployment has always been issue number one and has never been supplanted during the period

under analysis, with the exception of the month of March 2004, when terrorism took its place. However, this last issue (terrorism) went from second place in September 2000 (23%) to sixth place in January 2004 (8.8%)³. On the contrary, while this issue decreased in relevance, crime increased and housing went up in the ranking starting in September 2000 (5.1%), steadily gaining positions and speedily rising as a personal issue or problem for Spanish people; housing took third place in the ranking (17%) in the month of July, 2003, and second place (20,5%) in February 2004. The presence of economic problems on the personal agenda is important and they appear frequently among the first four rankings.

As we pointed out before, Graph 2 and Graph 3 show the evolution of the three most relevant issues on both agendas. On the personal, agenda, we can see that unemployment is the issue that maintains first place, in a very stable manner, followed by terrorism, although housing can be observed in third position from April 2003 onward. Housing only falls to fourth place or rank (13.3%) in September 2003, finally climbing to second place in February 2004. From the public agenda perspective, there are fewer variations among the three issues, with a timid rise in housing and the descent of terrorism as a public worry from July 2001 onwards being observed.

³ These data are from the authors' files; for more information, contact the authors' e-mails given at the beginning of the paper.

3.- Public and Personal Agendas in the Impact Area of Political Communication in the March 14 Elections. Conclusions for a Debate.

The public and personal agendas on the March 2004 CIS barometer⁴ carried out from March 16 to March 21, two days after the March 14 general elections, show the following hierarchy in their first three issues:

TABLE 1

MARCH 2004	FIRST ISSUE	SECOND ISSUE	THIRD ISSUE
<i>PUBLIC AGENDA</i>	Terrorism, ETA (76.9 %)	Unemployment (54.2 %)	Housing (20.3 %)
<i>PERSONAL AGENDA</i>	Terrorism, ETA (36.7 %)	Unemployment (32.7 %)	Housing (18.9 %)

The differences in percentages have to do with the different distribution that the issues have on both agendas, but they do not affect the rankings, which coincide. If we assume the Impact Area hypothesis,⁵ (the greater the coincidence between issue and ranking on both agendas, the greater the incidence or impact of political communication on these issues: *full identification between personal and public agendas*), we could say that *Terrorism* takes on a central function in the efficacy of Political Communication, and that this central function orients the vote in this (political) direction, which *frames* the economic issues (*Unemployment, Housing*), shifting them and causing them to be interpreted from the thematic priority of *Terrorism*. In other words, the March 11 terrorist action, by moving the relevance of Terrorism up to the first rank on both

⁴ Study 2558, March 2004, CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas): <http://www.cis.es/File/ViewFile.aspx?FileId=1880>

⁵ Bouza, F: "The Impact Area of Political Communication: Citizenship Faced with Public Discourse", *International Review of Sociology—Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2004

agendas and increasing its percentages, had a substantial influence on the *framing* of the political-economic situation as a whole and shifted the vote from the economic vote to the political vote.

The barometer previous to the March barometer (February Barometer, CIS⁶) shows this issue distribution (carried out February 20-27):

TABLE 2

FEBRUARY 2004	FIRST ISSUE	SECOND ISSUE	THIRD ISSUE
<i>PUBLIC AGENDA</i>	Unemployment (65.6%)	Terrorism, ETA (43.2 %)	Crime (22.9 %)
<i>PERSONAL AGENDA</i>	Unemployment (37 %)	Housing (20.5 %)	Crime (15.6 %)

The differences are obvious. The demoscopic situation, if we take the most optimistic vote estimate for the Partido Popular (Empresa TNS-Demoscopia, which worked, among others, for the company of the conservative daily newspaper ABC), showed a situation for the direct vote that evolved as follows in the subsequent days⁷:

⁶ Study 2556, February 2004, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS): <http://www.cis.es/File/ViewFile.aspx?FileId=2048>

⁷ TELE CINCO.com news. The *tracking* data were on the Telecinco web page; TNS-Demoscopia was in their employment during these electoral dates. Our efforts to get the matrices of these surveys were unfruitful, in spite of permission from Telecinco.

TABLE 3

DAYS/DIRECT VOTE (%) PP/PSOE	MARCH 8th	MARCH 9th	MARCH 10th	MARCH 11th	MARCH 12th	MARCH 13th
PP	21.1	26.8	23.9	24.1	23.6	20.7
PSOE	20.6	19.1	24.9	15.1	18.9	19.7

The direct vote has, in recent years and elections, been the best tendency predictor. And it is again here. But these data also show the immediate effects of the attacks: there is not so much an increase for the PP as a decrease in the direct vote for the PSOE of 9.8 percentage points. Terrorism as a issue for interpreting the situation (as a *framing* issue, but also as a *priming* issue for any immediate interpretation, with very high relevance), will mark voting behavior in two ways. In the first place, and following the classic hypothesis, the response to any attack against the State is an increase in support for the State (represented by the Government, although in this case the support was given negatively, by denying votes to the PSOE). In second place, in the face of the *government management of the terrorist act* (this is probably the best way to express what really occurred during these days without having to resort to the complex and thorny issue of the lie, which was the popular majority perception⁸) support is shifted to the main opposition party. At any rate, the *framing* of Terrorism should be at the center of the interpretation of electoral behavior. Various unpublished papers by different researchers (González, Olmeda, Bouza and Rodríguez, etc.), as well as our own

⁸ In the last few days, do you think that information has been manipulated/hidden?: YES: 64,7%; 24,7%; DOES NOT KNOW: 10,5%; DOES NOT ANSWER: 0,1%. (“Pulsómetro” Survey March 22, 2004, Cadena SER: http://www.cadenaser.com/static/pulsometro/antiores/encuesta_040322.htm)

research, show more or less the same situation, with nuances. As the evidence accumulates, we will publish it. The images of the Impact Area, Graphs 4 and 5 and Figure A, can be found at the end.

6.- References

BOUZA, F. (2004), “The Impact Area of Political Communication: Citizenship Faced with Public Discourse”, *International Review of Sociology – Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, Vol. 14, nº 2 p. 245- 259.

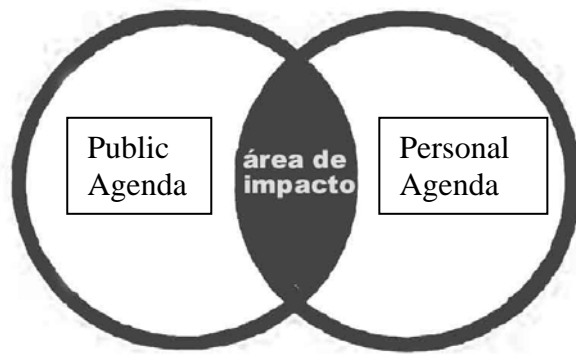
GONZALEZ, J. J. (2002), “Las elecciones generales del 2000. Voto ideológico / voto racional”, *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, 32: p. 7-33.

McCOMBS, M. y SHAW, D. L. (1972), “The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media”. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, nº 36, p. 176-187.

McCOMBS, M. (1999), “Personal Involvement with Issues on the Public Agenda”, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, nº11, p. 152 –168.

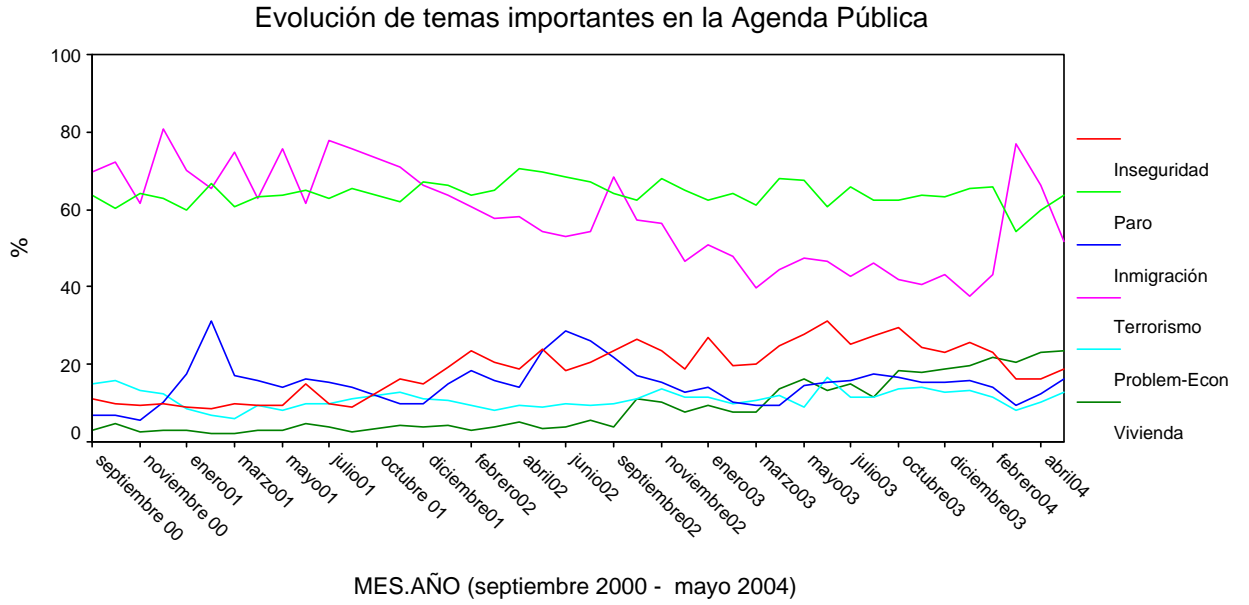
RODRÍGUEZ, R. y RAMOS, J. (2004), “La información como movilizadora social: redes sociales y tecnológicas”, comunicación presentada en el *VII Congreso Nacional de Sociología* en el grupo de trabajo conjunto de sociología política y de la comunicación, Alicante.

Figure A: Impact Area

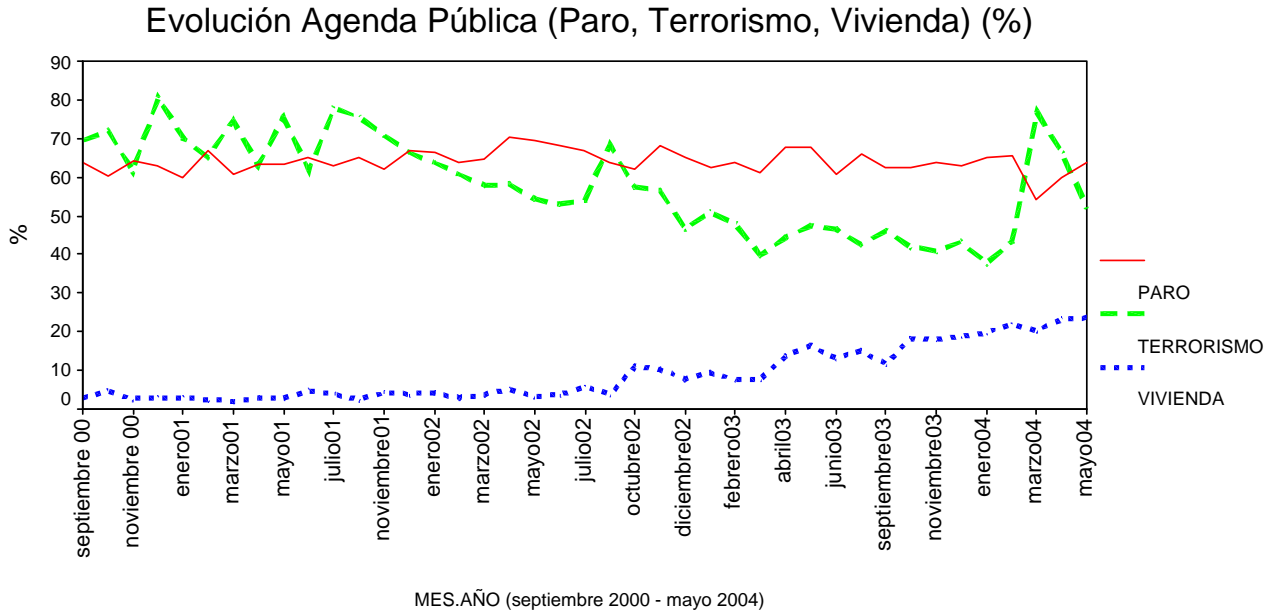


Graph 1

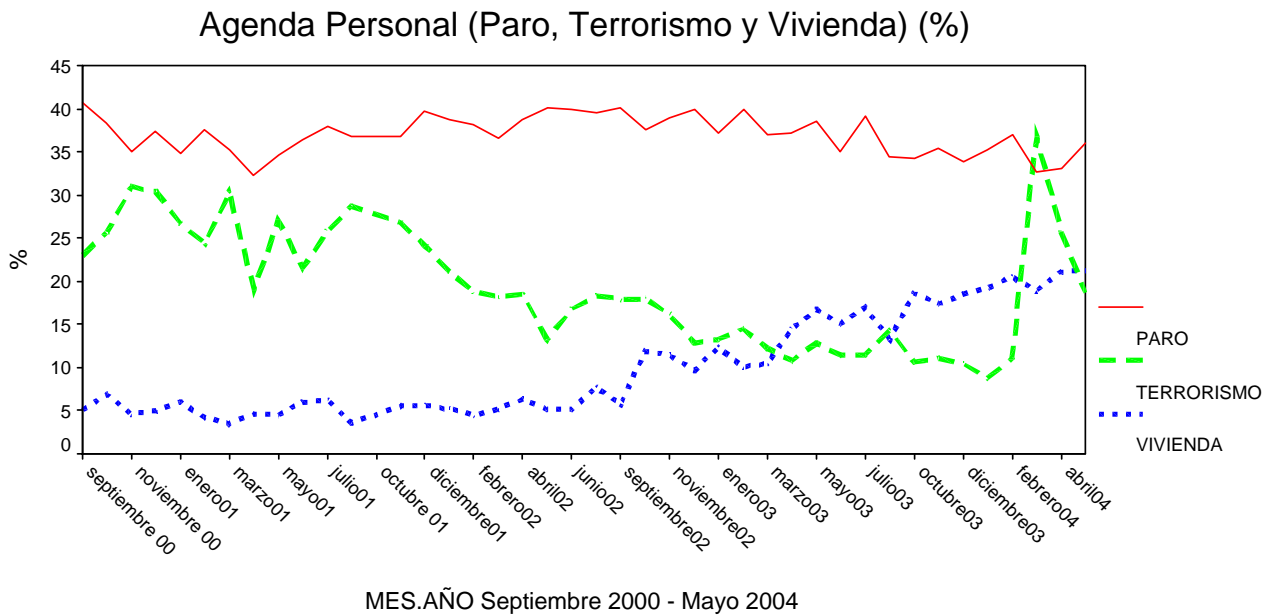
Evolution of Main Issues on the Public Agenda



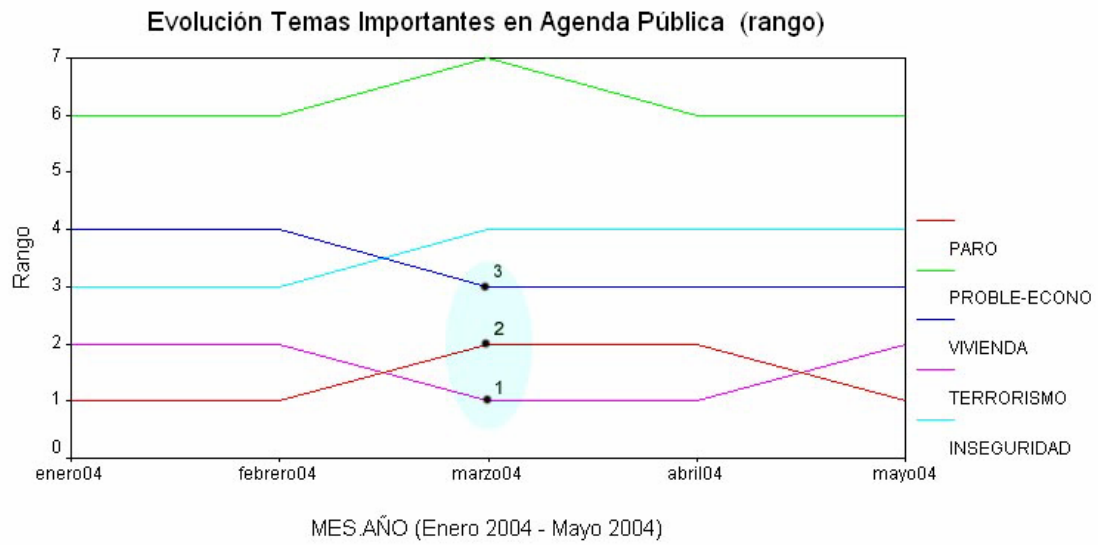
Graph 2: Evolution of the Public Agenda (Unemployment, Terrorism and Housing) (%)



Graph 3: Evolution of the Personal Agenda (Unemployment, Terrorism and Housing) (%)



Graph 4: Evolution of Main Issues on the Public Agenda (Ranking)



Graph 5: Evolution of Main Issues on the Personal Agenda (Ranking)

