

Article

Music as Soft Power: The Electoral Use of Spotify

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Abstract

The changes brought by new technologies and the ensuing rapid development of the communication field have resulted in an increasing number of studies on politicians' use of the internet and social media. However, while election campaigns have been the predominant research area in political communication scholarship, music has not yet been taken as an object of study alongside spectacularisation and politainment. Aside from some preliminary studies, systematic research on music in politics is scarce. The literature holds that music is a universal language. Music in politics can therefore be deemed to be an identification tool that can help politicians connect with voters and bring together positions between the different actors of international relations. This is an exploratory study about the use of music in political campaigning. It is focused on the role played by the Spotify playlists created by the main political parties in recent election campaigns in Spain. The initial hypothesis is that some of the candidates strategically selected songs to be shared with their followers. A quantitative content analysis ($N = 400$) of some Spotify playlists showed that there were significant differences in the selection of songs among the different political parties. This research contributes to the understanding of how Spotify has been used for electoral campaigning, as well as shedding some light on the current communication literature on music and politics.

Keywords

electoral campaign; politainment; political playlists; pop politics; soft power; Spain; Spotify

Issue

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1. Introduction

Part of human emotional language is intrinsically linked to the art of music and sound, which to some extent has an impact on the kind of lifestyle adopted by an individual, directly or indirectly related to their personality. No one today doubts that music is a crucial element of our daily lives, but only a few experts within the main currents of social and personality psychology seem to genuinely pay attention to this universal and omnipresent social phenomenon. Some studies have linked musical preferences to the personality characteristics of the population in general terms

(Barrett et al., 2010; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Herrera et al., 2018; Rentfrow, 2012), and there is a wealth of research specifically focused on the songs preferred by children, adolescents, and people under-25 (Delsing et al., 2008; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003). There are even studies that have taken Spotify playlists as a reference point to fulfil objectives as ambitious as trying to categorise social groups according to what the platform's users listen to on a daily basis (Anderson et al., 2021). However, until recent times, this proliferation of mature scholarship has not fully reached the vast area of political communication, apart from the existence of works such as that of Blankenship and Renard (2017),

Gorzelay-Mostak (2016), and other proposals that open the way and can be consulted in the references section of this article. The reason for the relative emptiness is that, despite the prominence of music in the preparation and conduct of any electoral campaign, the superficial approach often employed to address this subject may raise the suspicions of those who “have been arduously engaged in the endeavour of discovering the essence and being of the political” from their “wise doctrine” (Mantecón, 1950, p. 125).

The lack of a true bulk of academic contributions to lay the groundwork for unravelling the correlation between the public’s musical tastes and their political opinions (Lacognata & Poole, 2021) has left a relative vacuum in the field. This compels us to expand the field of study with proposals that focus on the use of music as a soft power tool. Soft power is the combination of elements based on attraction rather than coercion. Thus, in situations of tension, political leaders have three options: They can resort to the use of military or economic force and harsh measures, that is, hard power; they may opt for conventional and classic political strategies; or they may exploit cultural resources (such as music) and appeal to common values of a social group or ensemble. The latter is what authors such as Nye (2004) call “soft power,” whose meaning relies on the combination of cultural factors with moral values and ideological principles (Fukuyama, 2004; Nye, 2004, 2008). It is no coincidence that the new politics needs those aspects that are culturally appealing to the population and draw on art, fashion, sport, popular films, music, and all the trends showcased in the media in general and on social media in particular.

In this line, soft voters are characterised by being less politically committed than other groups of voters since they are not usually updated on parliamentary news and are less “sophisticated” and demanding in terms of education, habits, lifestyle, and cultural concerns (Baum & Jamison, 2011, p. 124). Theoretically, this type of voter is permeable to new persuasion tactics, with the possibility of modifying their vote based on the sympathy provoked by a candidate who is favourable to soft power (Kenski et al., 2010), and to be found among the new, young electorate. The importance of leveraging self-segmented spaces to apply micro-targeting techniques that help attract votes (Quevedo-Redondo et al., 2021) and the emergence of pop politics have made Spotify a possible space for electoral opportunities (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009). In light of a context where strategies linked to soft power are increasingly important, the aim of this study is to ascertain whether the Spotify playlists created by Spanish politicians (and their parties) fit a common pattern of being merely present on a popular platform (without applying criteria consistent with political marketing techniques other than creating a playlist within a campaign), or whether, on the contrary, playlists have differentiating characteristics depending on the ideology and type of audience they target.

1.1. Popular Music and Politics: The Rhythm of a Campaign

Popular music offers a wide range of opportunities for generational, cultural, emotional, and even political connections (Dunaway, 1987). It is therefore understandable that political advisors often want to use well-known songs in a campaign to try to connect the image of a president or presidential candidate with a title enthusiastically sung by people of all ages. The purpose is to lead the electorate to associate the success of this (often iconic) song with the political and social values that a given candidacy seeks to highlight.

Just as George W. Bush appeared before the media in 2000 while Tom Petty’s “I Won’t Back Down” was playing, in recent electoral campaigns it has become common practice for candidates to resort to melodies, choruses, cover songs, or any other type of musical rhetoric as a persuasion strategy often reserved for livening up rallies and creating advertisements without thinking of other options (Aguirre, 2021). Spotify and the creation of playlists have finally come to be used in Spain to broaden a candidate’s horizons in ways similar to that of former US President Barack Obama (Gorzelay-Mostak, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2011), who in 2012 started a trend that has been followed in the US by Hillary Clinton, Mitt Romney, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, among others (Alaminos-Fernández, 2021; Kasper & Schoening, 2016). Following the shadow of American influence, Spanish political campaigns have been inspired to use playlists in ways first tested in the US (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1996). The creation of playlists by political parties in Spain was first used by the PSOE when popular music was linked to candidacies in the Iberian Peninsula in the general election held in 2019. While the use of songs in the US electoral scene has been viewed from a quasi-cultural perspective, in Spain there are two major limitations: the lack of unanimous approval of the codes related to the use of music for transferring communicative content from the song to the candidates and the traditional rejection of Spanish politics by pop and rock artists (mass phenomena and elements of connection with generations of young voters). This has posed an additional challenge for politicians, as their choices of potential songs are reduced because the communicative use they make of an issue can often be delegitimised.

When singers refuse any connection with a candidate, they limit the opportunities for campaign action and increase the symbolic distance between the values of the musical and political worlds. However, when they agree to the use of one of their songs in an electoral campaign, it can become a sort of unofficial collective anthem, as once happened with one of the most emblematic melodies of the Spanish transition to democracy: “Libertad Sin Ira,” by the band Jarcha, which succeeded in evoking the achievement of freedoms (Peinazo, 2020, p. 363).

A song is all the more useful in electoral terms when it can activate socialisation codes; moreover, this effect increases when there is an interaction with the degree of knowledge that the public has of the lyrics and melody, together with the emotional effects that the combination produces (Alaminos-Fernández, 2020). Likewise, whereas a composition specifically conceived for electoral use conveys the values represented by the project or programme, when a song is “borrowed” the candidate must adapt to it. This is particularly important for understanding the scope of this study. It can also explain why a presidential candidate such as the Republican John McCain would include among his favourites some songs by The Beach Boys, Neil Diamond, and the Swedish group ABBA (timeless, with catchy rhythms and simple messages, and internationally known by the age group that coincides with McCain’s own age group), while Barack Obama opted for Bruce Springsteen, the Rolling Stones, and U2 (iconic artists with nods to the American sentiment and linked to age segments that included a younger electorate), as shown in Table 1.

As will be discussed in Section 2, many aspects should be considered when unravelling the parameters followed by politicians when creating their playlists. However, the main hypothesis in this study is that their reasoned choice meets one or more of the following basic criteria: a popular song (whether old or recent, to promote political fandom), a melody that would span across different generations (potentially attracting the population segments of greatest interest to each party), and/or an opportunity to provide overlapping meanings (between the song’s lyrics and the actual intentional political message).

2. Sample and Methodology

Content analysis was used for the variables and categories detailed in this section to check what criteria Spanish parties followed when creating their Spotify playlists.

2.1. Sample Selection, Identification, and Features

The sample was selected through an initial search on Spotify for keywords that included the names of the political parties currently represented in the Spanish political scene, as well as the names of their leaders. The search yielded a number of accounts related to political parties, including those of the Partido Popular (PP), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE; the most prolific party, with six public playlists), and Ciudadanos, as well as the personal profiles of some individual politicians, such as Alberto Garzón (Izquierda Unida, also known as IU), Pablo Iglesias (Unidas Podemos), and Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), among others. From this second list, only Alberto Garzón’s account was selected, as it was the only one that had a playlist associated with an electoral campaign in which the platform user was running as a candidate (2015 general election). It should be noted that playlists that were not linked to an election were excluded from the study, as well as contributions from anonymous users such as Santiago Abascal’s playlist.

Table 2 shows the playlists the analysis focused on; these belong to four political parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos, and IU, represented by Alberto Garzón), resulting in the study of six playlists with a total of 400 songs (of which only 23 were repeated) performed by 309 singers or bands.

The oldest playlist, “Campaña 20-D,” was created by the leader of IU and consisted of 74 songs that Garzón selected between 20 November and 16 December 2015 for the general election that was held on 20 December 2015. It should be noted that, while no lists after that date have been found in his profile, Garzón did add three songs to his playlist in March 2016. The candidate described the playlist on Twitter as being “a collection of music to take with us” (Garzón, 2015). At the time of the analysis, the playlist had 1,038 followers on Spotify and lasted five hours and eight minutes.

The title of the playlist created by the PSOE, “La España Que Quieres/♥!,” comes from the campaign

Table 1. Obama and McCain’s favourite songs, as published in the *Blender* magazine.

Barack Obama	John McCain
1. “Ready or Not” by Fugees	1. “Dancing Queen” by ABBA
2. “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye	2. “Blue Bayou” by Roy Orbison
3. “I’m On Fire” by Bruce Springsteen	3. “Take a Chance on Me” by ABBA
4. “Gimme Shelter” by Rolling Stones	4. “If We Make It Through December” by Merle Haggard
5. “Sinnerman” by Nina Simone	5. “As Time Goes By” by Dooley Wilson
6. “Touch the Sky” by Kanve West	6. “Good Vibrations” by The Beach Boys
7. “You’d Be So Easy to Love” by Frank Sinatra	7. “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong
8. “Think” by Aretha Franklin	8. “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” by Frank Sinatra
9. “City of Blinding Lights” by U2	9. “Sweet Caroline” by Neil Diamond
10. “Yes We Can” by will.i.am	10. “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” by The Platters

Source: Gorzelany-Mostak (2015, p. 9).

Table 2. Playlists in the sample.

Image	Playlist	Political party	Campaign	Number of songs		Percentage	
No self-image	Campaña 20-D (20-D Campaign)	Alberto Garzón (IU)	2015 general election	74		18.5%	
	La España Que Quieres/♥! (The Spain That You Want/♥!)	PSOE	2019 general election	110		27.5%	
	#ValorSeguro (#SafeValue)	PP	2019 general election	134		33.5%	
	The playlists of Edmundo Bal	Ciudadanos	2021 Madrid regional election	22	82	20.5%	
				Las Noches de Madrid (Madrid Nights)			30
				Jóvenes 30x30 (Youth 30x30)			30
Total				400		100%	

slogan used for the April 2019 general election, with Pedro Sánchez as a candidate. The list consisted of 110 songs as a nod to the 110 measures that the party had announced in its electoral programme shortly before (PSOE, 2019). The resulting list consisted of approximately seven hours of music for its 1,636 followers.

The PP created the list entitled “#ValorSeguro” between 12 and 15 April 2019, also as part of the campaign for the 2019 election, with Pablo Casado as a presidential candidate. Like the PSOE’s playlist, the title reflected the campaign slogan. The list consisted of 134 songs, lasting approximately 8.5 hours and was enjoyed by only 264 followers. As no publication announcing the playlist was found on the PP’s social networks, the lack of dissemination could explain the small number of people interested in the playlist.

Ciudadanos presented a collection of three lists associated with the Madrid regional election held on 4 May 2021 under the name “the playlists of Edmundo Bal” (Bal was the party’s candidate for the presidency of the Madrid region). The lists “Rock del Barrio,” “Las Noches de Madrid,” and “Jóvenes 30x30” were created on 20 April 2021 and were shorter than those collected by other parties. In contrast to the other playlists mentioned above, Ciudadanos wrote an accompanying text to the title of each playlist, introducing different ideas:

- The first of these, “Rock del Barrio,” described the candidate as “a public servant, guided by his principles and convictions,” who follows the difficult, but “only” right path. This was a rock list,

since this is Bal’s favourite musical genre, as he acknowledged on several occasions (Ciudadanos, 2021). The playlist consisted of 22 songs with a duration of one hour and 32 minutes and only had 34 followers.

- Within the second playlist, “Las Noches de Madrid,” Ciudadanos introduced some of its cultural ideas. The list had 24 followers, who could listen to 30 songs with a duration of one hour and 54 minutes.
- The last playlist, “Jóvenes 30x30,” referred to “measures for young people in Madrid.” Again, 30 songs were selected, with a duration of one hour and 41 minutes, and the playlist had 28 followers.

As with the PP’s playlist, these musical suggestions were not mentioned in the social networks either, so the ability to harness soft power to connect with segments of potential voters was diluted.

2.2. Analysis Variables

The starting point in the content analysis were the songs in the playlists, which were taken as units and gave rise to variables and categories. Specifically, 21 variables were studied and divided into three groups according to their usefulness and the basic information they provided. Thus, the first group included identification data from the Spotify platform itself, such as the title of the song, the name of the playlist in which it was included, the name

of the political party that selected it, the date when it was included in the playlist, the length of the song, and the singer or band that performed it. The position that each song occupies in the list is not taken into account, since without conducting interviews with the author or authors of the playlists it is not possible to know if the order responds to a strategic criterion. These first data are extracted from the Spotify platform itself.

The second group of variables focuses on more specific data about the artist and song, such as the performer's gender, their political positioning (progressive, conservative, no positioning, or anti-political), the artist's popularity (internationally known, nationally known, or marginally known in their country, differentiating between Spanish and foreign artists), the potential consumer or listener, the period when it was composed, the song's language, and, finally, if the melody has been or was considered to be an anthem by a collective. Searches were carried out on the interpreters' official websites and different media to find out some of this data. Political positioning as a variable is only coded if it is known explicitly. Artists can be labelled as progressive, conservative, or antipolitical (those figures who declare themselves without a political position and/or usually present an antipolitical message) if they are not. Thus, they have been coded as no attribution. This fact is common in the Spanish context since artists prefer not to openly express their condition so that their vision does not affect the support of their followers, which often translates into greater silence among the centre-right segments of the electorate. It is also interesting to point out that, regarding the potential consumers, those under 50 years of age are differentiated from those who are older, as well as the group that brings together listeners indistinctly (for this, the information provided by the groups and artists has been taken into account). Although the ranges seem exaggerated, it is worth noting that life expectancy in Spain is 79.6 years for men and 85.1 for women (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2022) and that those under 18 years of age are not a target audience during an electoral campaign. So this division represents an intermediate point between both values.

The third group of variables and categories was finally made up of data linked to the information provided by the music and lyrics of the songs. In this way, each song was coded according to musical genre (as indicated by the performer, musical group or producer), the predominant theme or appeal, and the dimension that the theme evokes according to the listener's personality traits. In relation to this, Rentgrov and Gosling (2003) established four dimensions (Reflective and Complex, Intense and Rebellious, Upbeat and Conventional, and Energetic and Rhythmic) and related them to different personality traits, each of which covers different musical genres. Therefore, the preference of one gender over another by a political party, intentional or not, will make it reach a specific audience better. It is also coded according to the tone inferred from the lyrics since this allows us

to identify from a mere song with a plainly festive intention to seek a change rebelliously, the promotion of a feeling of individual empowerment, or the exaltation of patriotic values representative of a country. Whether the message delivered had a positive, negative, or neutral spirit was also analysed.

Finally, the analytical task deals with the possible reasons for including a song in the playlist and its purpose. This aspect entails detecting whether the songs are included for simple fame (at the time of inclusion of the list or timelessly, that is, that despite the passage of time it continues to be recognised by the new generations), if there is a firm commitment to topics with explicit political allusions, or, on the contrary, if there was more of a forced overlap of meanings between the message of a popular song and the message that a presidential candidate or their party intended to launch at a given point. When this occurred, the classification involved noting meaningful words or phrases to assist in the interpretation of results.

3. Results

The fieldwork showed that, while there were differences between the four political parties analysed (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos, and IU represented by Garzón), they also shared some similarities that went beyond a greater propensity towards specific languages and music genres in the criteria they used to create their playlists. There were exact matches, for example, in the decision to include the band Vetusta Morla in the lists of all parties, albeit with different songs. These similarities were mainly found between Ciudadanos and PSOE (17 matches in the artist/group and nine in the song), followed by Ciudadanos and PP (16 identical choices of artists and 10 songs). There were nine matches between PP and PSOE (none of them regarding the chosen songs) and, in the case of Alberto Garzón, the relationships detected could be considered mere coincidences due to the derisory number of matches. Perhaps the most remarkable match was that the song "Cayetano" was used by both the PSOE and Ciudadanos in two of their lists. This is not surprising, as this song by Carolina Durante satirised the stereotype of the patriotic *pijazo*—term to designate a person who boasts according to a wealthy economic position—and explicitly mentioned Ciudadanos as the party that this type of subject votes for ("¿Qué es un 'Cayetano'?" 2020). The difference was that the PSOE used the song as an attack on their opponent, while Ciudadanos, upon realising that their electorate had taken it as an anthem, used it to apply reframing strategies and turn weakness/attack into strength/defence.

3.1. Denotative Data on Songs and Performers

In terms of the basic general variables, the predominant language used in the playlists was Spanish (Figure 1),

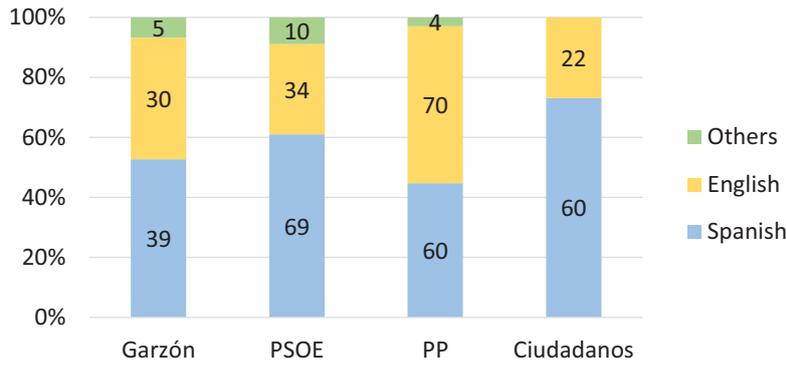


Figure 1. Song languages.

with the exception of the PP’s list. This was something of a paradox: One of the themes of this party’s campaign was the defence of the Spanish language; however, the songs in English outnumbered the rest by a small percentage. This was accentuated by the fact that of the four tracks were categorised as “belonging to other languages,” one of them was in Galician (“Chove en Santiago,” by Luar Na Lubre with Ismael Serrano, based on the poem of the same name by Lorca, as a nod to the Galician region, where the PP had governed since 2009). At the opposite pole was Ciudadanos, which showed a clear preference for the country’s language, with one of its lists entirely containing songs in Spanish.

Although English and Spanish were the predominant languages in the sample, there were some songs in Catalan, Majorcan, and Basque (PSOE), as well as other non-Spanish languages such as Italian and French. For example, Garzón’s list included the Italian song “La Rivoluzione,” which, as its name suggests, calls for a revolution. This politician’s list contained the widest variety of languages (English, Italian, German, and Portuguese).

While the non-Spanish bands included in the lists tended to be well-known internationally, the PP, PSOE, and Alberto Garzón included just some artists who are virtually unknown outside their country (Figure 2).

However, in the Spanish context, it is usual to include bands which are very popular within the country, despite not being internationally known.

The PP made the least risky choice, as 94.03% of their playlist songs were either internationally-recognised non-Spanish artists or nationally recognised Spanish artists. Alberto Garzón included a greater number of bands in his playlist whose popularity was anticipated to be lower among the Spanish public (22.7% of his choices were either non-Spanish performers who were only known nationally or little-known Spanish performers). Thus, the lists by Garzón, PSOE, and Ciudadanos included musical options categorised as “marginal” in that the artists included had a limited presence in the market (14.8%, 15.8%, and 18.1%, respectively).

In terms of ideological positioning, taking into account only Spanish bands or singers, Garzón’s playlist was the most significant regarding his choice of artists openly aligned with his ideology as can be seen on Figure 3.

The results showed that Garzón was the most coherent (and least inclusive) candidate in relation to this variable. His playlist had 80.5% of singers or bands that could be considered/declared themselves to be progressive, and none of the performers on his playlist had ever identified themselves as liberal or conservative. There were

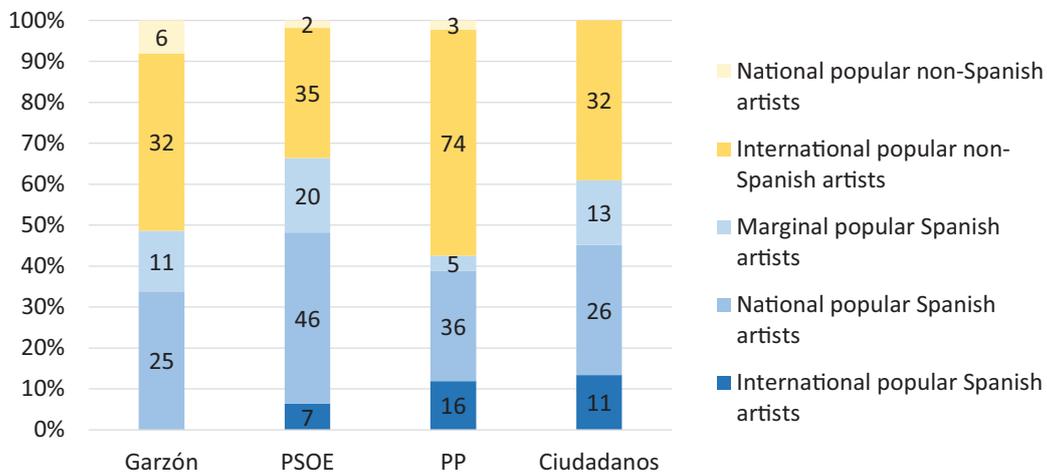


Figure 2. Popularity of singers and bands (distinguishing between Spanish and non-Spanish).

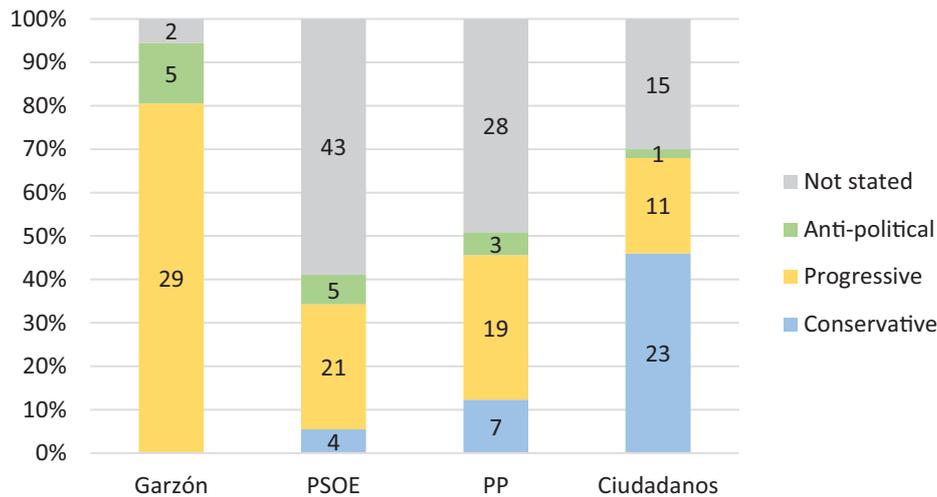


Figure 3. Political positioning of Spanish bands or singers.

even some non-Spanish bands with a clear progressive tendency and several who have spoken out against politics in general (anti-political).

From the 41.1% of PSOE’s songs that could be analysed according to the criteria of ideological positioning, 28.7% of performers recognised themselves as “progressive” within the centre-left or left spectrum. However, 5.4% of artists were also labelled as “conservative.” The latter group was part of the cultural movement called *La Movida Madrileña* (The Madrilenian Scene) who in recent years have confirmed their distance from the incumbent left-wing politicians. These are very popular icons of an era, representative of a generation, which is why the socialists chose to include them (bands such as *Loquillo y los Trogloditas* and *Fangoria*) in their playlists.

The PP were the party that least discriminated by the political positioning of the performers in the playlist, as it included a higher percentage of progressive groups than conservative ones (33.3% compared to 12.2%). Their list included *Celtas Cortos*, *Pereza*, and *El Último de la Fila*, bands that have proclaimed themselves to be left-wing sympathisers in media appearances and/or on social networks. Similarly, *Ciudadanos* also included progressive artists (22%), although there were more conservative musicians (46%) and included artists who are more recognised among the over-50s or were inclusive of all age groups (*Julio Iglesias*, *Raphael*, and *Las Nancys Rubias* are just a few examples).

If we look at the period when the songs were composed (Figure 4), different strategies were observed on the part of the various political options, which was important due to the relationship of this data with the target audience.

Alberto Garzón’s playlist showed a clear preference for songs composed in the first decade of the 21st century, followed by songs from the 1990s and those dating back to the last period of study (since 2011). Unlike the rest, this list did not include any song from the 1960s or 1980s, which confirms that the leader of IU prioritised

the song having a political message over other reasons linked to leveraging the popularity of a song.

The PSOE focused on more current songs, with a preference for the years immediately prior to the creation of the playlist. In contrast, the PP prominently used songs from the 1970s onwards, with very similar percentages up to the years of the list’s creation (only the famous French rendition of Édith Piaf’s “*Je Ne Regrette Rien*” dated back to the first period of study). As for *Ciudadanos*, its rock-based list was varied (with a preference for songs from decades prior to the 1990s), while the songs included in “*Las Noches de Madrid*” were mainly from the 1980s. The “*Jóvenes 30×30*” playlist was true to its title and, in accordance with the techniques of electoral micro-segmentation, incorporated current songs to attract new generations of voters.

These micro-segmentation techniques would explain why the PP focused on citizens over 50 years old in 59.7% of the cases, while the rest of the parties looked at younger age groups. In this context, Garzón had the most balanced collection by catering for all sectors, with a percentage difference of less than 10% in favour of the over-50s.

3.2. Data Related to Melody and Message

As can be seen in Figure 5 predominant musical genres were pop and rock. Of the total sample, 36.5% of the songs were pop songs and 31.7% were rock songs. These results are predictable in that these two music genres, as explained in the theoretical framework, were the most common and popular among the population.

Ciudadanos devoted an entire playlist to rock while reserving a notable space for songs belonging to the dance/electronic category (17%) and reggaeton style (10.9%) by performers as popular as *Maluma*. The most used genre in Garzón’s playlist was rock (60.8%), a type of music traditionally linked to the left in Spain. Whereas no space was given over to pop, the list did include music

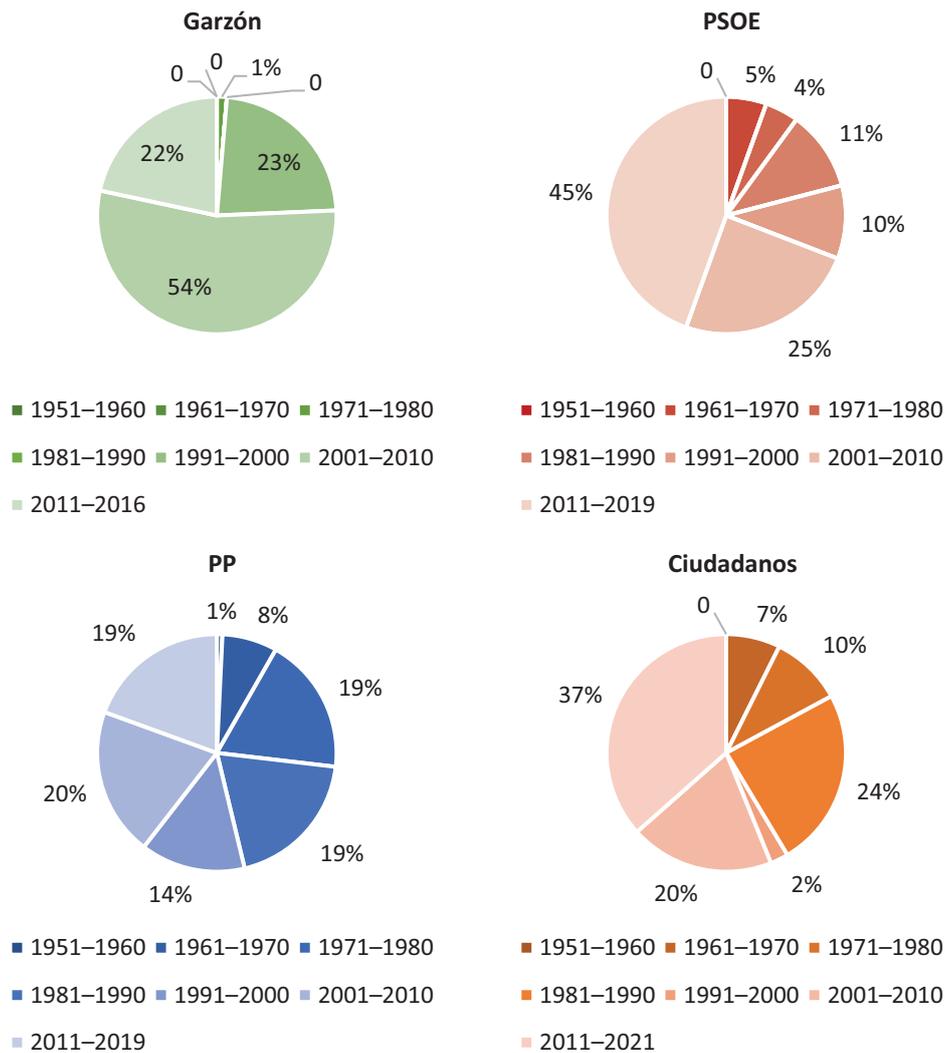


Figure 4. Periods when songs were composed (by political party).

from the hip-hop/rap and heavy metal categories (14.8% for both genres), which, once again, are linked to IU’s ideological spectrum. In fact, some of the rappers who sing protest lyrics and have been supported by Garzón on social networks have even been convicted by the Spanish justice system (“La música: ¿Un peligro para el poder político?,” 2019).

The PP and the PSOE also opted for pop and rock music, although the PSOE also introduced indie songs by lesser-known bands. Regarding the music-preference dimension based on Rentfrow and Gosling’s (2003) classification related to the rhythm and intensity of each song, the handling of these categories by the Spanish parties showed that they either intentionally sought all audience types, or none of them paid too much attention to the micro-segmentation that enables the soft power of music.

The two central categories stood out in the total sample (Figure 6), particularly Upbeat and Conventional (55.2% of the sample) and Intense and Rebellious (26.7%). These were categories that related to common preferences in the music world with which most

people identified, so no risks were taken with any of the playlists. However, Garzón gave his list over to a greater percentage of the first dimension, with songs like “Seguimos en Pie” by Ska-P and “Can’t Stop” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

As can be seen, more songs that fell under the category of Energetic and Rhythmic were included in the lists by the leader of IU (17.5%) and Ciudadanos (25.6%). The former chose songs from the heavy metal genre (with bands such as Linking Park and Papa Roach), while Edmundo Bal’s selection lent towards dance songs and electronic music (such as “Kings and Queens” by Ava Max or “Mocatriz” by Ojete Calor).

The dimension of Reflective and Complex was the least present in the sample and was only marginally used by the parties. The music in this dimension is slower, which may make it less useful for an election campaign, since the presidential candidates, far from wanting to convey calm, want to be proactive/energetic, even musically.

After considering the inclusion criteria and completing the first part of the coding, several options

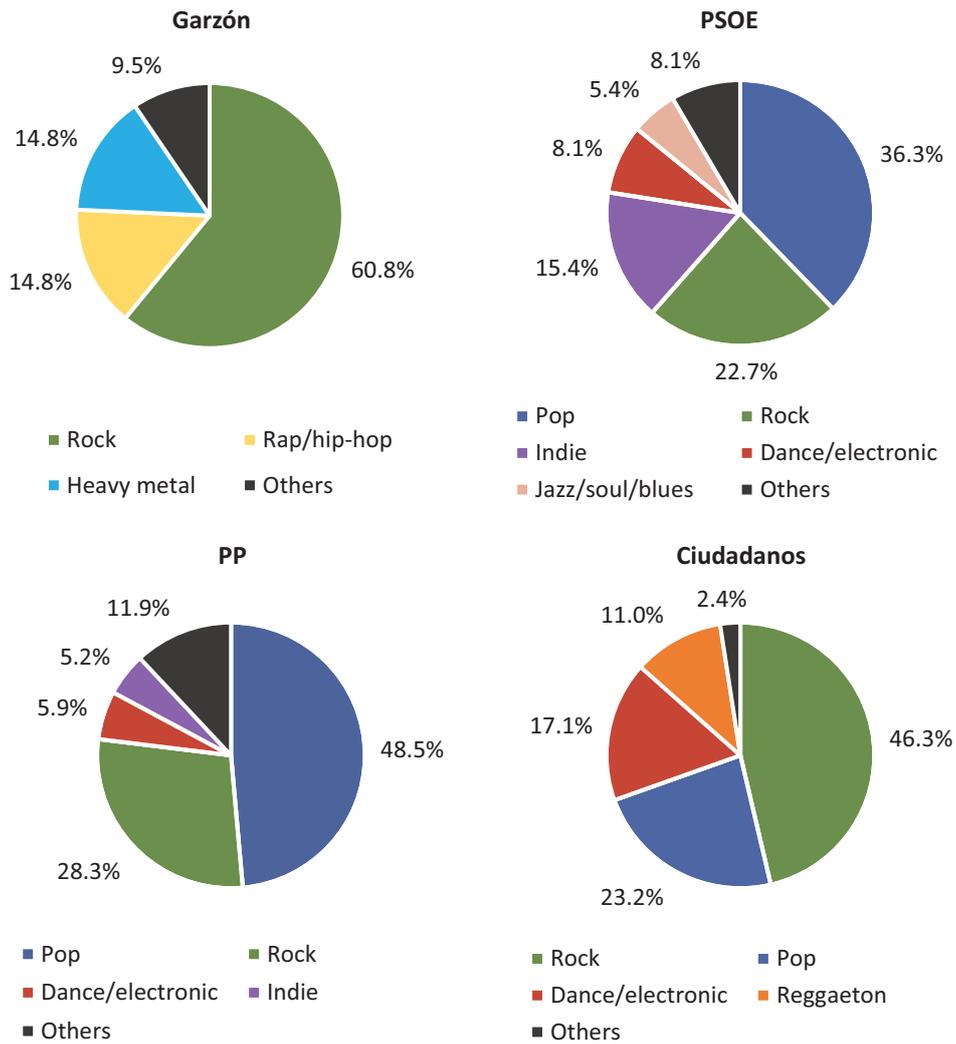


Figure 5. Music genres with the highest representation by political option.

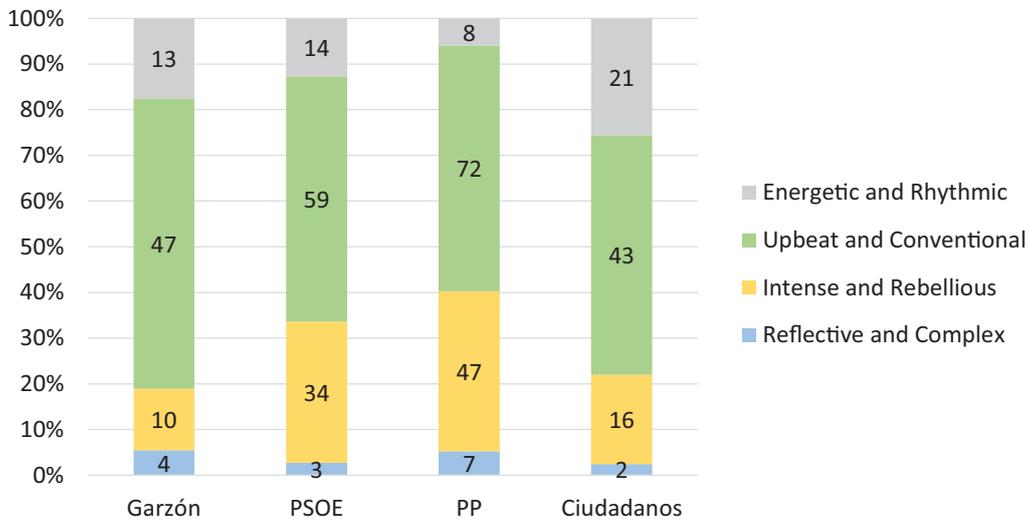


Figure 6. Dimensions of musical preferences. Source: Authors' work based on Rentfrow and Gosling (2003).

were identified that could explain why the songs were included in the playlists (Figure 7), beyond the fact that the songs were chosen by personal tastes (as is the case with the list “Rock del Barrio” by Ciudadanos and Edmundo Bal):

1. Either the song was popular at the time the playlist was created or the artist was a musical idol;
2. Either the song or the artist is timeless;
3. The theme appears in an advertisement or in a relatively well-known film;
4. Either the title or the lyrics have political utility (overlapping meanings);
5. None of the above.

Some songs could be assigned to multiple categories for this variable, as shown by the following case: The PSOE’s playlist included “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor, both a timeless song and artist. This song has been covered by other performers but has also become better known by being featured in several films, series, advertisements, and even video games, so it would be categorised as meeting criteria 2 and 3 above. Likewise, the song “Cayetano” matched two codes, as it was a popular song at the time the playlist was created, as well as being clearly satirical of parties other than the PSOE. This explains why the figures in Figure 7 exceed the number of songs in the sample.

The results showed that the PP chose mainly timeless songs (61.1%). In other words, songs that are well-known despite the passage of time and have become part of the collective imagination (such as “With or Without You” by U2). In addition, the PP also chose songs that were popular at the time the playlist was created (22.3%), such as “Uptown Funk” by Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars, or songs that had become well-known due to their use in entertainment products such as series or films (20.9%). Again, as in the case of the artist’s recogni-

tion variable, the PP compiled a list of easily recognisable melodies, regardless of whether the lyrics had political utility (14.9%). That is, there was no elaborate strategy in the creation of the playlists other than to please or entertain followers.

Ciudadanos had a similar percentage to the PP in terms of using timeless artists (62.5%), although with a higher percentage of songs that were popular at the time of creating the list than their opponents (24.3%). However, as 21 tracks (25.6%) had either a title or content that was clearly political, they showed that their playlists were not only intended for entertainment purposes but that they also wanted to convey a message. “Vente Pá Madrid” by Ketama or “Puede Ser Que La Conozcas” by Jorge Drexler and Marwan are some examples of the use of meanings to show that Madrid (the city which Edmundo Bal sought to represent) inspired positive feelings in Ciudadanos.

Political utility prevailed in the songs selected for the playlists compiled by the PSOE and Alberto Garzón: 60 songs out of 74 alluded to politics in one way or another (80%). An example of this was the track titled “Adiós España” by Tron Dosh with Nach, in which, apart from the explicit title, the content was a critique of Spanish society, emphasising the precarious employment situation of young people. Despite there being a better balance between politically motivated (39%) and timeless (37.2%) song choices in the PSOE’s list, there was a clearer intention to gain an electoral benefit. For example, the lyrics of the song “Lisístrata,” by Gata Cattana, openly attacked the right and aptly used soft power to convey the arguments defended by Pedro Sánchez’s party.

The content analysis of the lyrics showed the themes addressed in the songs (Figure 8). This is important in order to identify those with no specific intention other than to entertain (either using festive or melancholic songs), or, on the contrary, songs aimed at conveying

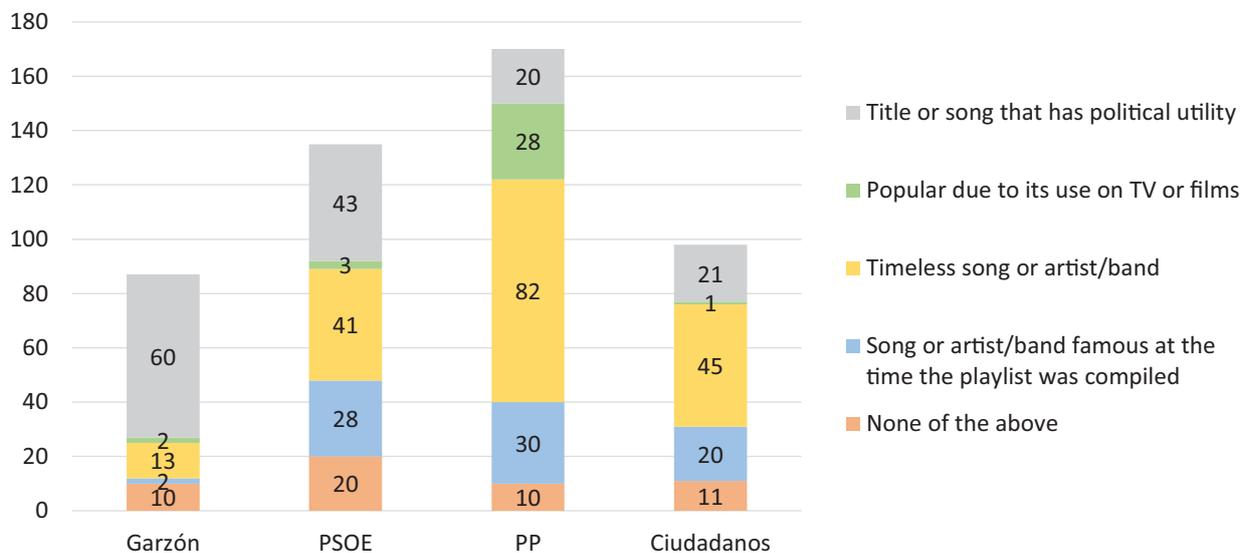


Figure 7. Criteria for a song to have been included in a playlist.

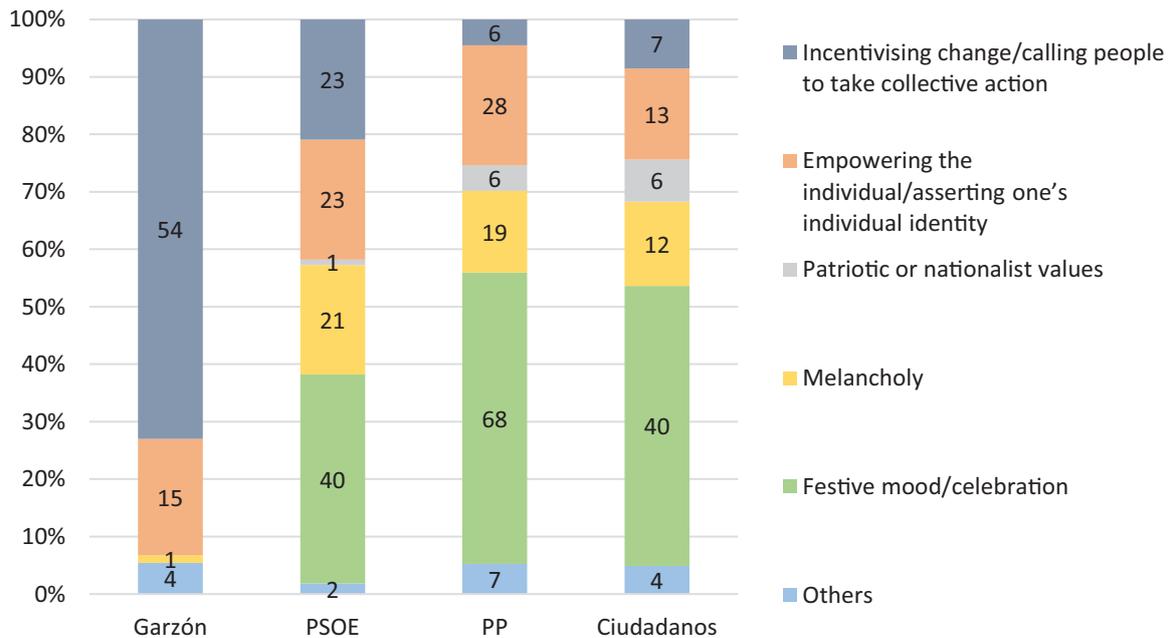


Figure 8. Main themes in the songs.

the message that the parties wanted their audience to receive. Specifically, the following messages were identified: calling people to action to affect a (usually political) change by promoting individual empowerment or highlighting patriotic and/or nationally representative values.

The PP, the PSOE, and Ciudadanos mainly chose songs that sought to entertain. The PP included the most songs of this type (50.7% of its total). These were tracks markedly linked to party times (“La Macarena” by Los del Río, “Sólo se Vive Una Vez” by Azúcar Moreno, and “Antes Muerta Que Sencilla” by María Isabel fell into this category). Alberto Garzón, unlike the rest, used songs more focused on promoting a message that advocated change, something very popular in election campaigns. Examples were the songs “Rueda la Corona” by La Raíz, which is a criticism of the monarchy, and “Hipotécate Tú” by Def Con Dos, which addresses housing speculation and its negative consequences.

The second most common theme used to convey a message was empowerment. This category included songs whose lyrics had to do with self-improvement and self-empowerment. “Resistiré” by Dúo Dinámico, included in the PSOE list, and “A Quién le Importa” by Alaska y Dinarama, from the PP list, were examples of this. It is also interesting to note that the PP and Ciudadanos included the most songs with patriotic values (which matched their programmes and ideology), including “Mi Querida España” by Cecilia, “Madrid” by Ariel Rot and The Cabriolets, and “Sevilla Tiene un Colour Especial” by Los del Río.

Finally, it is worth noting the use of songs with a specific theme, usually of social interest. The PSOE included some songs that dealt with feminism (such as “Lo Malo” by Aitana and Ana Guerra), or that criticised violence against women (“Ni Una Menos” by Alejo Stivel and Miss

Bolivia). In contrast, the PP used songs linked to the concept of “freedom” (the leitmotiv of the latest electoral campaign for the election in the Madrid region), such as “Libertad Sin Ira” by Jarcha and “Libre” by Nino Bravo. As mentioned above, the IU leader’s playlist was characterised by the inclusion of protest or political songs, although, curiously, it did not include any singer or band that was entirely made up of women.

4. Conclusions

This study has confirmed that music has been used as a source of soft power by Spanish political parties and candidates, but has also raised questions about their level of awareness when they compiled their Spotify playlists. The communication and marketing experts of the Partido Popular, the PSOE, Ciudadanos, and IU are clearly aware of the importance of having a presence on platforms that are popular among the main groups of soft voters. However, the lack of maintenance and updating of the playlists outside the contextual framework of a campaign (justified by the low number of followers that the lists usually have) denotes a certain lack of continuity and initiative regarding a strategy which requires little time and financial resources. The PSOE was the only party which, despite not extending its playlist, provides content to its profile through the podcast *Dónde Hay Partido*. Although the PP followed this line with the podcast *Activemos España*, it stopped publishing new content in February 2022.

The interpretation of the results makes it possible to argue that, in general terms, and based exclusively on the analysis of the songs selected by each party (or by its leader), Garzón sought to appeal to people’s consciences using a selection of music with markedly

political (or anti-political) messages, in line with the tastes he presupposed would be popular among his supporters. Instead, PSOE, PP, and Ciudadanos used more entertainment-based approaches and focused on leisure goals. The PSOE's selection also looked at basic items of their programme such as defending feminism. There was a moderate percentage of songs used based on the appeal of overlapping meanings in all the playlists. This tendency was less pronounced in the PP, as the popularity of the songs was prioritised to ensure that the playlist followers would find familiar tunes that could be considered to be appealing to the average citizen.

The PSOE combined the intention to entertain, with making veiled or even satirical attacks on their opponents (by using songs like "Cayetano," by Carolina Durante) and appeals to segments such as feminists and regionalists. Ciudadanos, however, sought above all to make a generational connection, as explicitly stated in the title of the "Jóvenes 30×30" playlist, described as "measures/songs for the young people of Madrid."

To sum up, the Spotify playlists created by Spanish parties and candidates not only had a common pattern, namely, having a presence on a popular platform, but they also had differentiating characteristics depending on the ideology and target audience. Garzón (IU leader) resorted to more ideological filters in his selection of songs, while the PSOE attempted to strike a balance between a self-interested search for overlapping meanings and entertaining the masses. Ciudadanos, meanwhile, worked across generations (something useful for attracting soft voters). Whereas the PP seemed to aim for mere searches for unquestionably popular songs that would liven up any conventional event without applying criteria consistent with political marketing techniques, they appealed to their potential electorate by recommending songs and artists that were more closely related to the social imagination of the Spanish public.

In addition to the contribution made by the review conducted to provide a solid theoretical framework on the subject, the findings of the study have resulted in the creation of a proven analytical template that can be replicated in future research to further explore the use of music as a soft power tool. These results are therefore only an example of the avenues of research that can be pursued to further the current knowledge in this area.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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