Chapter 21
The Debate on the Pandemic in Spain:
Discursive Strategies in Political Argumentation

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ABSTRACT

The chapter analyses the discourse of the political debate in the Spanish parliamentary confrontation on the coronavirus and its health and economic consequences. To this end, it analyses eight debates led by the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez, and the leader of the opposition, Pablo Casado. The discursive strategies of both influence the central aspects of the political framework on which the legislature is structured, as can be seen in the grammatical mechanisms, in the lexical selection, in the evidentiality around the sources of legitimacy, and in general, in the stylistic and emotional component of the respective interventions. In this way, the pandemic has become a privileged reference for the political programmes of the different parties.

INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a remarkable impact on several aspects of democratic societies, beyond health, that have affected our ways of living together, the economic reality, consumer habits, and the way we manage public and private activities.

Faced with this challenge, governments had to adopt urgent measures whose implementation has provoked political responses in parliamentary debates, for, as Shepherd, MacKendrick & Mora pointed out (2020, 2), "the pandemic emerged among anxieties about the trustworthiness of government institutions".

The management of this crisis, including the adoption of important curtailments of civil liberties, happened in a moment of extreme political complexity in the evolution of the democratic model in ad-

vanced societies in which these new proposals have even questioned the design of the institutional state, as Maesschalck points out (2020, 128):

The closing of the public space and the restriction of individual liberties, substituted by non-transparent, expedite administrative procedures, have restricted the political order to its most questioned form from an intellectual and social point of view, that is, the obsolete structure of a representative and surveillance democracy (versus other forms that started to manifest themselves in previous decades)

In this context, the relation between the executive and legislative powers seems particularly complex, both because of the impact of the adopted solutions on the democratic quality and transparency and the implications of the different political actors, as indicated by Dodds & *alii* (2020, 293):

These are truly extraordinary times, which will require parliamentary democracies in particular to think about how and when they recalibrate the relationship between the executive and legislature. As authoritarian governments have shown repeatedly, there is a danger that the state of emergency becomes the new norm.

Because the crisis, as Walby points out (2020, 15), "offers an opportunity for the executive to legitimate a claim for more power on the grounds that in such exceptional circumstances, these powers are needed to counter an existential threat", democracies are faced with a challenge related to the response of the political parties according to their strategic goals. As Kavanagh & Singh affirm (2020, 1002): "Democracies also have the added challenge of managing competing political factions and institutions, some of whom may have political incentives to undermine response".

In the case of Spain, the fragmentation and dispersal of the political discourse, after decades of bipartisanship, the questioning of the institutions born out of the *Transición*, and the problems of the autonomous state design have created a situation with specific characteristics whose result is described by Crespo & Garrido (2020, 17) in the following manner: "En España, en la actual fase de explosión de la crisis, se ha producido, más bien, un cierto *blame game* o juego de la culpa acerca de las responsabilidades políticas por la crisis, en las que cada fuerza política ha intentado realizar un enmarcado y una estrategia de comunicación propia" (In Spain, in the current phase of bursting of the crisis, there has been a somewhat blame game or assignment of blame about the political responsibilities for the crisis in which each political party has created their own communication frame and strategy).

The pandemic arrived in Spain at a moment of great political and institutional complexity. To understand how the political debate is articulated, the frames within which legitimizing discourses are constructed, the argumentative strategies and the emotional keys to the semantic references, it is necessary to know the main elements of the parliamentary and legislative context:

- An unstable government with a fragile parliamentary majority born out of a coalition of two left-wing parties, one belonging to the traditional political stablishment, *Socialist Party* (PSOE), and another, *Unidas Podemos*, that reached power after the disturbances created in the previous economic crisis;
- A right-wing opposition that is fragmented, with a new extreme-right party, *Vox*, that threatens the hegemony of the main right-wing *Popular Party* (PP*)*, and another party, *Ciudadanos*, receding

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