

## Integrative Methodological Proposal to Investigate the Thematic Approach in Political Communication

### *Propuesta metodológica integradora para investigar la tematización en la comunicación política*

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#### **Abstract:**

In the field of theming in political communication, the integrated use of different theoretical approaches, paradigms and research techniques implies the complementation of the developments on the effects, processes, and actors of the public problems, as well as the combination of paradigms and quantitative and qualitative techniques. This paper aims to formulate a mixed methodology for the research in this field and is based on the review of recent publications, as well as in the descriptive and explanatory resources of diagrammatic. The study of theming must consider the conditions, processes and contexts of emergence and configuration of public affairs. These processes are multidirectional, multilevel, and multistage, and comprise communicative exchanges, strategies and transactions between individuals, social groups, and institutions, who promote their issues and frameworks in the public sphere.

#### **Keywords:**

Theming; Mixed Methods; Public Opinion; Political Communication; Meta-research

#### **Resumen:**

*En el plano de la tematización en la comunicación política, el uso integrado de diferentes enfoques teóricos, paradigmas y técnicas de investigación implica la complementación de los desarrollos sobre los efectos, procesos y actores de los problemas públicos, así como la combinación de los paradigmas y técnicas cuantitativas y cualitativas. Este trabajo tiene como objetivo formular una metodología mixta para la investigación en este campo y se apoya en la revisión de publicaciones*

*recientes, así como en los recursos descriptivos y explicativos de la diagramática. El estudio de la tematización debe considerar las condiciones, procesos y contextos de surgimiento y configuración de los asuntos públicos. Estos procesos son de múltiples direcciones, niveles y etapas, y comprenden los intercambios, estrategias y transacciones comunicativas entre individuos, grupos sociales e instituciones, que promueven sus temas y marcos en la esfera pública.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Tematización; Método Mixto; Opinión Pública; Comunicación Política; Metainvestigación*

**1. Introduction**

Theming, in its broad understanding and from its Luhmanian perspective (Luhmann 1970, 1989, 2000; Grossi, 2007) of political communication structuring, refers to the configuration processes in public opinion, both individually and collectively, which deal with the most important themes and problems that concern or affect people in a political society. The thematic structure of political communication expresses the social complexity and, in turn, allows it to be represented in the form of processes involving various actors, various levels and phases, besides continuous interactions that produce interrelated results. Likewise, it provides content and functionality to the activities associated with political interaction, negotiation, and decision-making.

The integrated use of different theoretical approaches, paradigms and research techniques constitutes a way of approaching complexity: the mixed methodology offers new and greater possibilities to study current societies (Headley & Plano-Clark, 2020), whose complexity is their fundamental mark. This perspective, within the area of themes of general interest, refers to the complementation of the approaches on the intermediate effects of the mass media, on the one hand, and the treatment of the public nature of social problems, on the other hand, as well as to the combination of quantitative and qualitative traditions and techniques, in the field of political communication. The potentiality of theming, in terms of the articulation of politics, is conceptual, practical, and procedural.

The main purpose of this work is to propose a mixed methodology to investigate theming in the political communication: multiple and varied factors that concur in certain circumstances, and make this issue a multidimensional phenomenon, take part jointly in the configuration processes of public themes or problems. This condition justifies an integrating vision of research paradigms, methods, and techniques, as well as, from a specifically theoretical view, the integration of the related yet different approaches of agenda-setting, priming, and framing, in the space of media effects, and public problems, in the field of pragmatic sociology.

This text is placed into the field of communication meta-research (Ioannidis et al., 2015), more particularly in the practices of revision and rethinking of theories and research methods. Within the framework of this display, it is applied to the specific contour of political theming. From the analysis of the concepts, methods and techniques that have been used and developed in recent publications within this area of knowledge, the categories or transversal dimensions have been extracted and reformulated. This

way, these aspects become tools or instruments for new, broader, and more complete investigations, with methodologies appropriate to the challenges outlined by the current reality.

The formulated mixed design contemplates two properties of capital importance for the purposes of the researches in this space: concurrence in the collection of information and data, triangulation in the analysis and explanation of the results (Bericat, 1998; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). Considering its multidimensionality, its usefulness in the study and application of this representation in public opinion is also argued. The integration effort constitutes a contribution *per se*, towards an expanded and overall representation of public themes or problems, especially since its development is limited, regarding its clear relationship with the study of the growing social complexity and the need to consolidate knowledge in this area.

The general objective of the work is to propose a mixed methodology for the investigation of theming in political communication, which makes it possible to obtain a more precise and complete representation of the public opinion processes and the complexity of social reality, through the configuration of thematic structures that result from the combined use of different communication theories, methods, and research techniques. This effort includes the theoretical-methodological articulation of the effects, processes and actors that make up this dynamics, in which multiple and varied factors converge, at different levels and phases of interaction, not necessarily successive or with the same starting point.

The broad and confluent perspective of theming has not been frequent in the space of political communication research, despite its potential usefulness in this path of work. Böckelmann (1983) was the first to fully incorporate this matter into the study of mass communication. It contemplates the use of themes as essential strategic resources of politics in complex societies and is actually configured in the field of interactions between the political and communicative systems (Saperas, 1987). However, the *agenda-setting*, *priming* and *framing* approaches are the currents that have received the most interest and development from researchers of political communication and public opinion (Borah, 2015; Moy, Tewwsbury & Rinke, 2016).

The methodological and applied approach is based on the review of the most recent publications in the field of public themes and problems, as well as on diagrammatics as a descriptive and explanatory resource, the latter in order to indicate and prescribe the relationships between the categories of analysis that support and give rise to the methodology formulated below. The first specific objective is aimed at specifying the quantitative and qualitative procedures and indicators that, used in combination, provide an integrated view of the configuration of matters of general interest. The second specific objective is to outline the usefulness of the methodological proposal for the research, application, and communication strategies, as well as for the analysis of cases or study situations

## 2. Frame of reference

Public opinion researchers have made numerous attempts to articulate the similarities and differences, as well as the nature of the interplay between agenda-setting, framing, and priming (Lee & McLeod, 2020). These theories, widely used in the academic context, are located in the field of uses and effects of the mass media. These effects can take place at the individual level, at the intermediate level of social or political groups, or rather at the macro-level of the system or society as a whole, although the quantitative approach at the micro-level has turned out to be predominant. The effects consist of the potential or actual changes that the media can cause in their users. For these changes to occur, people must use or be exposed to media content or messages.

Agenda-setting effects refer to the way in which media messages shape perceptions of the issues that people consider as most important; framing *effects* focus on the impact of messages in terms of the meaning in which issues and events are interpreted, while *priming effects* tell people what criteria to think about when making subsequent judgments (Lee & McLeod, 2020). These are cognitive effects that differ with respect to their scope in the processes of thematic configuration in political communication; this scope may include to fix or establish those themes or problems more crucial to people; to apply their frames of meaning or interpretation, or using them to evaluate political leaders.

Theming is linked to society and politics even beyond communication. Public opinion expresses this complex relationship, and its representation as a thematic structure also contemplates social and political processes. In the field of the theory of public problems, Cefai (2014) has highlighted that it is a process of emergence, configuration, stabilization, and institutionalization of public problems, which results from correlations of forces or conflicts of interest at high levels of public action. Within the context of public opinion, not all the groups count on the same power, influence, and authority to define the nature and reality of the problems (Gusfield, 2014).

The capacity of the media to shape the political agenda depends on many factors. For this reason, the multiple combinations of variables such as the media studied, the subject analyzed, the criteria for selecting and measuring the political agenda, and the temporary period covered may produce different results for the research in this field of study (Ardèvol- Abreu, Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2020). Notably, few studies on news effects have incorporated interpersonal communications into their designs and modeled the interactions between news and conversation (Tsfati & Walter, 2020).

Valkenburg & Oliver (2020) have recently warned about the need for future research on communication to truly investigate and compare the effects and effectiveness of messages, both in the recipients and in the generators themselves. Within the perimeter of theming in political communication, this indicates that public themes or problems can actually be established by the mass media, but their configuration may also integrate processes of collective definitions in the face of potentially problematic or controversial situations or concerns, these coming from the people and groups involved and interested. Concerns which the wide range of media make visible and amplify, which in turn contributes to its public generalization.

Media effects theories have failed to appreciate the interactions, interdependencies, and transactions at the system level as well as to consider the fact that these media shape and reshape politics, culture, and people's meaning (Strömbäck, 2008). The thematic structure of public opinion, and as what is a reproduction of social complexity, is made up of processes at different levels and phases, various actors and their relationships, and continuous interactions and results. Tsfaty & Walter (2020) further warn that the media effects paradigm is also challenged by technological changes in both the media and the political environment during the last two decades. Such effects are not only moderated by individual predispositions, but also by external factors.

The shaping of public opinion has been analyzed following various perspectives, methods, and tools. Recently, it has become even more complex with the emergence of the new Internet-based media. From a holistic perspective, opinions arise within a complex process that involves various dynamics and scales of phenomena at the following levels: the individual or biological level, the level of social interaction, and the one of communication technologies. At the social level, interaction generates influence of inter-individual opinion and technologies; more specifically, the media influence the population through a new artificial social interaction (Sánchez, Aguilar et al., 2019).

Within the academic research on communication, there has been a very intense and lengthy theoretical debate on the independence of the framing perspective with respect to agenda-setting. However, the significant influence of studies on the agenda in the development of framing and the epistemological differences that underlie its multidisciplinary origin have given rise to two main currents of research: on the one hand, a quantitative line, assumed by neopositivist epistemology and agenda-setting methodologies. On the other hand, the interpretative current, derived from constructivist sociology, a current which is in favour of exploring the production of discourse and social representations using qualitative methods (Valera, 2016). Framing studies' tendency has been qualitative (Vargo, 2018). An integrated approach to the effects and processes of theming must result, *per se*, in an interparadigmatic and mixed method. Scheufele (2000) had proposed, concerning the attempts to integrate the paradigms of effects, a comparative model of agenda-setting and priming, on the one hand, and framing, on the other. Following this order, he pointed out the key differences in terms of content characteristics, audience variables, and media effects. Such formulation includes several blocks of basic variables: demographic controls and pre-exposure guidelines; post-exposure orientations that determine how individuals process information received from the media; relevance perceptions and frames at the individual level; weighted indices of media use; similar results between perceptions, evaluations and attributions when describing themes or problems.

Chernov & McCombs (2019) have specified in a recent work that, from their constructivist approach, framing allows a much more direct impact than that sustained by the agenda-setting tradition, based on the perspective of scientific realism. However, both views converge on the cognitive element, when considering the psychological effects of media. Agenda-setting compares the public's perception of media constructs, certainly a constructed reality, with real-life indicators that describe these constructs. Therefore, its concepts and methodologies are a continuation of the epistemological

stance and premises of scientific realism. The network's agenda-setting holds that the media can transfer the associated issue packages. This latter approach corresponds to the third level of the agenda-setting still under development. The second level was the attribute in an attempt to integrate the effects (McCombs, Llamas, et al., 1997).

More than with agenda-setting, the configuration processes of public affairs are conceptually and methodologically closer to the agenda-building vision. Ardèvol-Abreu, Gil de Zúñiga & McCombs (2020) highlight the shift from the interest in exploring the influence by the media agenda of issues on the public agenda to better studying the factors that limited or enhanced the influence of the message effects. A third phase focused on the influence of external agendas on the media agenda, which has been known as agenda-building. Pfetsch (2016) has pointed out that the direction of influences, the order of cause and effect and the time frame in which an issue emerges in various agendas have become more volatile and ambiguous. The methodology of agenda-building studies must be adapted to the new complexities, time frames and hybridization of media systems.

### **3. Methodological proposal**

The integrated research method of theming in political communication that is formulated in this work is based on two premises: the overall view, on the one hand, which assumes that the parts involved in its processes are interdependent and are related to certain components, phases, and levels of the research object. On the other hand, the combined use of paradigms and collection techniques as well as such combination applied to the treatment and analysis of data and information jointly enable the following: a representation of the complexity that, precisely, the courses of conformation of public issues entail and collect, in the field of knowledge and practice of political communication. By constituting its reason for being the understanding of the complexity of society, theming is methodologically deductive, relational, and contextual.

From the luhmannian perspective (Luhmann 1970, 1989, 2000; Grossi, 2007) and within the integrated approach supported by this methodological approach, the study of political theming focuses on the public issue; taking this issue as an object of investigation, a unit of analysis and a constitutive element of the thematic structure derived from the configurative processes of the themes and problems in the public sphere. These processes are multidirectional, multilevel, and multistage, and in such processes the exchanges, strategies and communicative transactions unfold between the different promoters of collective definitions, as well as between the publics involved, engaged or interested, and between the viewers of the issues. The sequences are associated with the selection of themes, as well as with the articulation of opinions around those themes.

The methodology presented has as its main axis the application of paradigms and research techniques adapted to mixed designs. Figure 1 describes: the dynamics of this methodology, characteristically mixed, with a perspective of integration of convergence strategies in the approach of the problem of research and the formulation of a single objective; the concurrence in the collection of data and information from quantitative



and qualitative, primary and secondary sources; the complementation of the analyzes of both research paradigms; the combination of both the facets of the process and the products and results of the analysis, and the triangulation in the discussion, explanation and interpretation of the findings obtained in the work and in the fulfillment of the proposed objective.

**Figure 1**

*Elements of the integrated method of research on political theming*



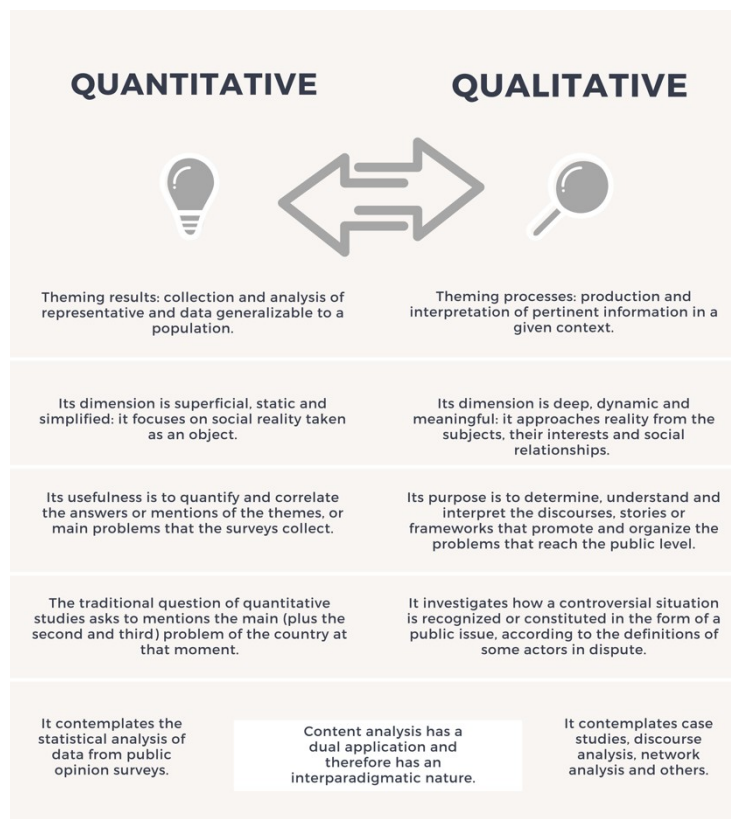
Not only the combined methodologies and their results are a means for inquiry and a useful tool to achieve discoveries and novelties in an area of knowledge and application, but also they constitute an end *per se*, since they are sustained and united with reference to a common theoretical framework. For these purposes, it is necessary that the fields of study are open and do not oppose the possibilities of exploring the growth potential offered by the complementarity and the theoretical-methodological integration. The interrelation between theoretical and methodological developments on the same problem of research, and therefore on the same social reality or part of it, as is the case of the thematic structuring of political communication, carries the advantage of a view which is broader, but above all multiform and compound.

The methodological integration in the field of political theming suggests that a quantitative or a qualitative approach, taken separately, is not broad nor complete enough to reproduce the complexity of social reality, and particularly concerning public opinion, considering its representation under the form of a thematic structure. Figure 2 summarizes: the strengths and weaknesses that quantitative and qualitative methods entail in the field of study of the configuration of public themes or problems. The methodological triangulation is expressed in the background and transversally, both in the various sets of data and information collected and processed in the studies, as within

the various points of view and analyzes of the aforementioned sets, and their explanations and interpretations.

**Figure 2**

*Facets of methods in political theming*



Researches on theming that have followed the mass media effects approach have privileged the empirical method and have allowed to find correlations between the highlighted themes, their attributes and networks by the media, and the problems considered most important for the citizenry or regarding public agenda. These studies have investigated agenda-setting theory in a special manner, at each and every level, including the second level of attributes, related to framing theory, and the third one, a certainly more recent development, according to which mental representations result from associations or networks of rational or emotional predispositions, and other types of constructs. This has imposed, as a limit of inquiry, the examination of the connections between the agendas, leaving aside the processes of social construction and the context in which the themes or problems emerged.

The thematic constitution of public opinion contains, however, that more superficial part of the aggregation of individual opinions on the main or most important problems. This aggregate perspective is not ruled out nor is it exclusive regarding the deliberative facet; it is rather related to complementary dimensions of those results and processes taking part of the theming as a whole. It similarly happens with the expansion of the

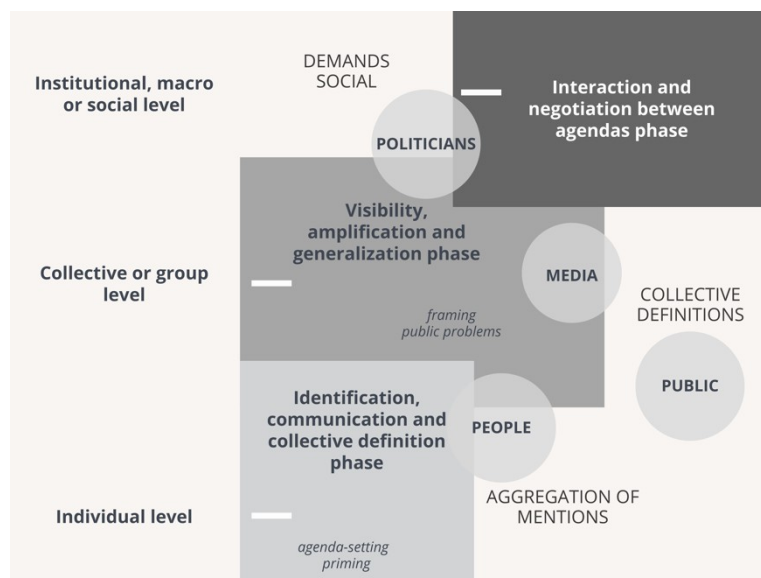


methodological approach, to cover the processes of this problem of study. This requires considering the objective conditions and the more general context of the issues, as well as the actors and the public. The paradigms, methods and research techniques must converge under the same objective and a single set of data in the analyzes and interpretation.

The thematic structure is, at the same time, a method of study, a set of processes and their relationships, and a result of communicative exchanges and transactions. For this reason, the functions of this thematic structure of public opinion are communicative, social, political, and institutional, that is, this configuration manifests the interests of a society and the correlation of forces, just as it links public themes and problems with power. Figure 3 summarizes: the integration of the components (effects, processes, and actors), the levels in the vertical axis, and the phases in the horizontal scale of theming. These dimensions constitute a strength to understand and account for the complexity of public opinion and the social reality it represents. Public affairs are selected and positioned (order or location), as well as reach the general interest and are transferred in the form of demands to governments, which are precisely asked to make decisions and resolve the problems.

**Figure 3**

*Configuration of a thematic structure in political communication*



Public issues constitute an ordered relationship of the processes of political communication in the form of a thematic structure; at the same time, such representation establishes the limits of the political system. This way, public themes and problems reduce the complexity of the many and diverse preferences, expectations and demands that circulate between the citizens' agenda, the media, and politics. They also form interactive and transactional areas between the themes and the interpretations by each of the actors of political communication. The themes or problems involved work as loads

of meaning, being the object of development inasmuch as they acquire their public character, from the individual opinions to the public conversation where citizens' demands are discussed and collectively defined.

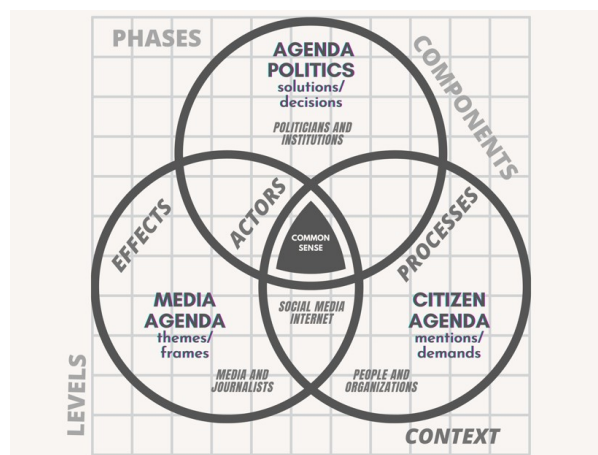
#### 4. Utility and application

Theming in political communication has the dual functionality of being an object and serving as a method of study. Its usefulness even extends to strategic planning. The key element in all three cases lies in complexity: in terms of what is an object of study, the complexity of social reality is considered as a problem of research; as a method of study, it represents it in the form of thematic structure and applies it as an analysis model; moreover, the location, dimension and contextualization of public themes or problems are strategic resources when it comes to an institutional or electoral communication plan. In its overall view of processes, it establishes a scheme of analytical, applied, and strategic utility. Its scope and importance contemplate the fact that the thematic structure constitutes a reference of common sense, precisely where the proximities and differences are recognized and understood, and the opinions, actions and decisions made in politics are intersected.

Political theming is recognized within the multidimensionality of public opinion and therefore constitutes a multifactorial and multidimensional phenomenon, as shown in Figure 4. For these reasons, its examination requires combined, broad, and flexible methods. The theoretical-methodological integration map of the dynamics of public affairs makes it possible to identify, describe, relate, and explain the dimensions of a social reality, or part of it, as a problem of research, based on the themes or problems that structure the public or thematic agenda. The centrality of the study question regarding the public theme or problem does not imply limiting its study to this category of analysis. This would suppose the same as concentrating the research only on media effects and, therefore, would equally result in a linear, incomplete, and isolated picture of the phenomenon.

**Figure 4**

*Theoretical-methodological integration map of theming*

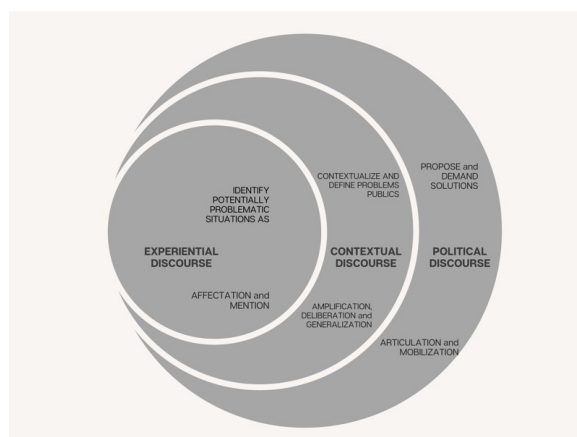


The perspective of effects restricts the knowledge and application of theming from and around the media, both traditional and digital. Although the theme reproduced or imposed on the media agenda is an essential part, it does not constitute the totality of the public conversation that configures public problems. Very specifically, the media agenda refers to a list of issues that obtain media coverage. Neither can the citizenry agenda, also referred to as the public or interpersonal agenda, be limited to the set of mentions collected by the surveys on the problems that mostly affect or concern people, classified as the main or most important. For its part, the political or politicians' agenda, which reaches the institutional dimension of the thematic structuring, must be studied, and applied independently, in the same way as political discourses have been analyzed.

Social media and other Internet resources have enhanced, in the field of public themes or problems, the capacities of all political communication actors to access the public agenda and shape those public issues. Therefore, the theming of public opinion must necessarily consider in its processes the direct, interpersonal or group communication, either organized or not, which involves politicians, citizens, new digital media, and old media in the digital world. The possibilities also exist for other non-traditional political communication actors who come to exert influence in the field of political communication. This refers to the competitive public attention, which is no longer an exclusive attribution of the media. Politicians, individuals, and groups also count on their own strategic resources to play in this struggle as generators of messages; in this case, themes or problems with the potential to become public.

Figure 5 contains a discursive map that exemplifies how the proposed mixed methodology can be used for the investigation of theming in political communication, for the analysis of cases or study situations and for the application to the strategic uses in communication campaigns within the political environment. Two areas of research have made it possible to verify the usefulness of the proposed methodology: the political crisis in Venezuela during 2019, integrating with the same objective the analysis of surveys, newspapers, Twitter and WhatsApp, and the electoral campaigns in Spain during that same year, considering data and information from polls, newspapers, electoral debates, Twitter and discussion groups.

**Figure 5**  
*Discursive map of theming with mixed method*



The quantitative approach has been expanded and completed through the identification of personal or experiential, contextual or circumstantial, and politicized or ideologized discourses. The former refers to the perceptions of potentially problematic situations in the immediate environment; the second one refers to the collective definitions of social reality, and the third one implies the ideologization or partisanship of the previous discursive types. This application of the expanded and combined methodology of theming has shown that the discursive processes and referents in a society are an essential part within the fluxes of this phenomenon, that is, within the construction of thematic structures as expressions of political communication.

The dynamics of the public issues involve matters of general interest, but beyond their mentions, it is their conditions, processes and contexts of emergence and configuration what must be considered, or, in other words, it is the dispute between interpretations and definitions about situations that potentially become public themes or problems, as well as the arguments or narratives that they entail. In this context, the media continue to be key players, not only in the sense of establishing agenda themes, their relevance, and their frameworks of interpretation in terms of effects. In addition, they constitute areas of exchange and negotiation within the theoretical line of public problems, in which the issues that come to form the thematic structures of interaction and negotiation between the various agendas and their actors are made visible and generalized.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This work has developed a methodological research proposal of theming in political communication, which seeks a broader and more developed representation of the processes of public opinion and the complexity of social reality, through the configuration of thematic structures as a result of the combined use of different communication theories, research methods and techniques. In this vein, the quantitative and qualitative concepts, procedures, and indicators have been specified; these elements, when used in combination, provide an integrated view of the shaping of political issues. Likewise, the usefulness and application of the methodological proposal for the investigation, application and analysis of cases, or study situations, have been exposed.

As theming is a tool to address the complexity of public opinion and social reality in general, the first verifiable issue is that a methodology restricted to a research paradigm and its related techniques can only allow a very limited approach to this phenomenon of study, which impedes, precisely, the control of complexity. Therefore, in this field of knowledge, a multi-instrumental approach that responds to the multidimensionality of this dynamics is pertinent. This does not imply the sum of techniques, but rather an integration of theories, methods and techniques that constitute a mixed research design such as the one presented in this work. However, it should also be noted that improving results implies increasing research costs, the time dedicated to field work and the hours per person for the analysis.

With the diversification of research methods and strategies, growth is achieved in this line of work, integrating quantitative and qualitative paradigms and techniques, while broadening the theoretical perspective of political theming beyond the effects to reach

the processes and actors. Such broadening includes the context of emergence and configuration of public themes and problems. Proposing a mixed methodology in this communication cannot be considered a finished action, since it only means opening a perspective of methodological development within the communication space. Therefore, this work requires continuity, which in turn implies the incorporation of other factors in the ability to generate issues; incorporating them and keeping them into the public agenda, so that they have impact on the selection and location of matters in the thematic structures.

Public opinion must be conceived as a product of the interactions and transactions between individuals, social groups and institutions that promote themes or problems becoming relevant in a generalized manner, in the public sphere. It is not only a question of a specific theme, as well as its definition, or its interpretation accessing the public agenda, but also that these themes come to acquire the visibility, relevance and priority that make them a matter selected by the public attention. Within this competitive framework, conflicting definitions of a social theme or problem are confronted, which implies different approaches to the nature, causes and consequences of such situation, besides involving the media, which will intervene as visionaries, amplifiers, and activators of support.

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