

PSYCHOLOGY AND POLITICS.  
CASES OF COMEDY AND FEAR IN THE  
MEXICAN PRESIDENTIAL  
CANDIDATES OF 2006

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## ABSTRACT

We can argue that without the active presence in the media, political proposals or candidates lack any ability to gather broad support. Thus, politics is framed in content, organization, process and leadership by the logic of the media system. Moreover, the increasing complexity of the campaigns has led candidates and their strategists to resort to mechanisms, discourses and images that stimulate the unconscious of the elector: hopes, fears, aspirations and projects.

This article aims to review political psychological strategies that were used in the Mexican presidential campaigns in 2006, focusing on the uses of comedy and fear, and the arguments that have been presented regarding the benefits and harm that they entail.

**Keywords:** *Political Psychology, elections, comedy, negative campaigning, Mexico.*

Political campaigns have changed dramatically; however, such changes are unprecedented in the times of a new mechanism of mass media, and political parties, especially at election time, use them. First, the newspapers were responsible for spreading the messages, then radio, then television and now the Internet. However, the notable changes is the deepening of the use of techniques of political communication with the main purpose of appealing to the subjective questions of readers, listeners, viewers and Internet users; ie turning to their fears, phobias, hopes and dreams and finally to their imagination. In this manner not only the government's proposals are passed along, but what people feel is emphasized. For example: if a candidate expresses his economic proposal noting the need for state regulation of the economy, the other contender, which is closer to free market ideas, can point to the other as a "communist" and disseminate what might be the effects of such economic policy, but would also have to resort to lying: an argument that a nationalized economy would generate an immediate inflationary increase in expenses. This indication naturally has the objective of demonstrating the possible consequences of the nationalized economy by instilling fear among people by telling them that their wages will decrease and prices will go up.

In Mexico, appealing to the emotions of voters during campaigns is not something new. The campaign slogans of different candidates in different elections demonstrate this: "Welfare for your family" (Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, 1994); "The vote for change" (Vicente Fox Quezada, 2000), and "For the good of all, first the poor" (Andrés Manuel López Obrador, 2006). However, this political-emotional phenomenon worsened during the 2006 elections, where the aforementioned Lopez Obrador who represented the Party of the Democratic Revolution, Labour and Convergence, and the today the Citizen Movement; Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, the National Action Party; Roberto Madrazo Pintado; by the Institutional Revolutionary Party and

Green Ecologist Party of Mexico; Patricia Mercado Castro for the Alternative Social Democratic and Peasant Party, and Roberto Campa Cifrián by the New Covenant Party.

The 2006 campaigns to elect the head of the executive power of the Union were, without doubt, the most competitive and confrontational, not only among political actors but also between society that has taken place in recent history . The constant accusations between the PAN candidate and left, using a classist language that divided society between poor-honest / rich-evil, and the intrusion of external agents of the candidates created a confrontation. Moreover, this was reinforced with the request of the Coalition for the Good of All for a total recount and writing of the final report made by the Electoral Tribunal of the Judicial Power of the Federation.

During the election campaign, launched on January 19th and completed on June 28th, candidates toured the Mexican states in search of the popular vote and participated in rallies, shared their proposals and appeared in the media, but it was television that was the scene of tensions between the different political projects (Table 1). In the end, the common practices in which voters are mobilized with modern strategies which are used for political marketing and mass media were combined were hybrid campaigns (De la Torre & Conaghan, 2009). Besides the traditional spot, advertising formats were diversified although that did not result in improving the quality of services or building a real debate on the national agenda. There was no dialogue between candidates, parties and citizens.

That is what this text is about: the use of the strategies used by the candidates in the that election, with an emphasis on those that resorted to the stimulation of emotions through fear and comedy.

These campaigns were developed with an electoral law passed in 1997 which allowed the purchase of advertising media companies by third parties or politicians. In 2007, as part of a process called State reform, the Constitution of the Republic and the Federal

Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures established that the political parties would agree to radio and television ads only during public (official) times, and political parties, individuals and corporations could not develop propaganda in favor for or against a candidate or party. It is in this manner that the campaigns which are a focus of this study reflect, perhaps for the last time, the use of strategies on television to generate fear among voters. This new regulation was tested in the elections of 2009 and 2012, and are substantially different than in 2006: the parties did not engage in electronic media advertising.

### PSYCHOLOGY, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a truly political, institutional and legal, even cultural phenomenon, but it is also of a psychosocial nature, because it is examined as a matter of national thought taken from the hidden and overt references. The uncertainty of not knowing who will win the election is a feature of the democratic system that sometimes seems to be replaced by voter mistrust towards institutions guaranteeing the organization, development and qualification of the elections.

Democracy is not the object of joy for a few or better yet, a stronghold of rulers, but a way of life in daily practice. We can refer to article 3. of the Constitution of Mexico, in particular subparagraph a) of Section II, which considers democracy “[...] as a way of life [...].” It is a value and a symbol. Here’s a difference: for some (the rulers), democracy is shown in laws; for others (the ruled), it promotes a social, peaceful and equal coexistence where beliefs prevail. Democracy, understood in the latter manner, cannot be reduced to processes of political representation. It has a social agenda, a non-instrumental character value- exactly the definition of what is an election campaign provided by Norris (2002: 127) which helps introduce us to our topic: “[a campaign intended] to inform, persuade and mobilize [the electorate].” Knowing and

explaining the democratic phenomenon and its internalization of democratic values and transmission and behavior that individuals have in spaces where democracy takes place is one of the interests of political psychology.

The first record on political psychology can be found in the work of Gustave Le Bon, published in 1910, "The Psychologie Politique Sociale et la Défense". The French author's concern is governance: political psychology aims to determine the means to govern a people. For this to be achieved, the author takes us to the intimate knowledge of the mentality of individuals and peoples, where political psychology consists of five sources: 1. Individual psychology; 2. The collective psychology; 3. The psychology of crowds; 4. The psychology of peoples, and 5. The lessons of history. Le Bon (1921) gives five political aspects of particular relevance that shape his thinking on political psychology: 1. The stage assembly and scenery in political acts that serve to influence sensitivity and imagination of viewers; 2. The environment must be animated by flags and banners, combined with the careful use of sound and silence; 3. leaders properly handle hope, expectation and faith; 4. The grammar of persuasion, which is built for the prestige it suggests; assertion without proof; repetition, and mental contagion; finally, the last aspect is the creation of a sense of caring community, the "we".

## COMEDY IN POLITICS

A new format in Mexico employed in these campaigns was what Barbaro Origilio called "info-fiction," which was used by Televisa in the comic-political series "*El Privilegio de mandar*" and soap opera "*La fea más bella*" (García Rubio, 2009 : 5-6). Origilio refers to, while returning to Jean Baudrillard, a simulation can have real consequences if the actors immersed in it are perceived as real. Thus, what was staged in "*El Privilegio de mandar*", a parody of

the electoral process, could be considered by the audience which at one time were for the most part voters and included information about the candidates, political parties and campaigns, may well affect the political perception of the viewers (Origilio., 2007: 250 and Del Arenal et al, 2007: 261-288). Furthermore, with respect to the soap opera “*La fea mas bella*”, in one scene a character said he would vote for the “President of employment”-alluding to the campaign speech of candidate Felipe Calderon, and then explained his reasons. A few days later, the producer of the soap opera, Rosy Ocampo said that the reference was strictly commercial and not political, and such a line exposed on the screen corresponded to the commercial area of the station. It was, she said, like how other mentions are made to promote baby items or cosmetics. Moreover, candidates of all parties, except for Lopez Obrador who rejected the invitation, attended the now defunct program *Otro Rollo*, whose audience was primarily young people. Led by Adal Ramones, they discussed their policy proposals colloquially. Each candidate responded differently to the questions and activities that the host asked of them. On March 7, 2006 the cycle of visits of candidates to the program began.

Roberto Campa was the first and was accompanied by his family, and because he has his own business in the automotive industry, an analogy of the country as an old car was made. Felipe Calderon arrived the 14th of that month and spoke of his father. He was visibly nervous when he began but when it was his turn to participate in the corresponding dynamics which consisted of painting a wall with the logo of his party, he was relaxed and confident. A week later, on the 21st, came Roberto Madrazo. He spoke of the “new” PRI, his love of exercise and the illness of his wife. During the interview came the “friend Roberto”, a parody of a presidential candidate portrayed by the actor Arath de la Torre in “*El Privilegio de mandar*”. On March 28, it was the turn of Patricia Mercado. She was the last candidate to be on the program and the conductor Adal Ramones was characterized by “Ady



Ramones” who pretended to be a childhood friend of Mercado. The host of the program received a gift from Mercado: a book with photographs of prominent women, a detail that the other candidates did not provide. In the dynamic, she had to participate in the preparation of dinner, where references to ingredients were made that included the names of the other parties (Gunther et al., 2007: 289-312).

Two questions: Why were the candidates on programs such as “*Otro Rollo*”? Why was so much attention paid to “*El Privilegio de Mandar*”? The answers can be found in the humor and political functions that: a) achieve greater social visibility of politicians, helping to better capture the attention of citizens and the media itself; b) facilitates the process of persuasion, functioning as a communication stimulus to influence the beliefs, attitudes and behavior of citizens; c) serves as a means to insult and ridicule the opposition. In this case, the humor is based generally to show the incongruity and absurdity of the actions, or proposed policy positions of the adversaries; d) generates a positive attitude and willingness among listeners, as are the objectives of humor to make you laugh, to please you, to be liked and seduce the audience; e) helps generate a higher level of memorization, as voters more easily remember those phrases, speeches and political rallies which were present in that atmosphere; f) improving the understanding of the message conveyed with the use of metaphors in a humorous way; g) helps achieve true differentiation and identity, as people tend to better identify with politicians that have a good sense of humor and those whose main gift is to make them smile; h) helps elevate the mood of the audience and overcome difficult times; i) mood has great power to bring people together and get the cohesion of a group helping to form, for example, highly competitive campaign teams, j) Finally, mood affects voting behavior; ie, generates an effect on decision-making and electoral voter motivation (Valdez Zepeda, 2011: 78-80).

## NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

If on one side the campaigns use humor, those appearing in the other so-called negative, black or contrast campaigns, there is no doubt that they were the most common in 2006. It should be said that these are not in themselves a product of recent manufacture. They have existed in the United States since campaigning began. One example is the dispute between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson in 1824 which continued four years later where they were used pamphlets and just over 600 newspapers who were supporters of General Jackson, which attempted to account for the fraudulent government management of Adams while supporters of the latter made mention of the mother of Jackson which was labeled a woman of low moral principles and that led to a pronouncement of indecency (Perloff, 1999: 19-40).

In contemporary terms it can be said that the use of negative campaigning using spots with direct attacks on candidates appeared in the American election of 1952, when the Republican candidate, Dwight Eisenhower, used an ad called Americas Asks Eisenhower Answers, where some citizens were asked questions about the state of the economy and the war and its responses.

In general, it blames the Democrats for the low levels of prosperity, corruption and rising prices. His campaign slogan was "It's Time For a Change". In 1956, he had the answer from the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson, that under his campaign "What Say my General?" questioned the broken promises of the Republicans (Kuschick, 2008: 102).

But the great moment of negative campaigning took place in the succession of 1964, when Lyndon B. Johnson, who became President of the United States on November 22, 1963 after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, was seeking reelection. He used the Daisy Girl Spot, directed against the nuclear threat and particularly against the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, whom he accused of wanting to use the American weapons against

the Russians. The aforementioned ad was shown only once, but its effect was devastating to the Goldwater campaign. This leads us to say that an ad that produces effects on the public need not be passed countless times, but it only requires to be well done and achieve the purpose of impacting the audience (Kuschick, 2008: 102-103)<sup>1</sup>.

In relation to negative campaigning, arguments can be found in almost all subjects. Some believe that they are a necessary part of political competition and their prohibition is unnatural. They further argue that there is no conclusive evidence that the attacks discourage voter turnout or that the general opinion of democracy is affected by such messages. If conveying information and persuasion are two of the fundamental tasks in a campaign, criticizing then becomes a form of transmission, which causes these types of campaigns to be considered positive for a democratic system because they generate better informed voters. In addition for their supporters, there is a relationship between increasing levels of attack campaigns and declining interest in elections as a mechanism to hold the rulers responsible; negative messages powerfully influence electoral decisions, and there is no link between the reduction of trust and civic participation with increasing negativity in campaigns (Geer, 2006).

At the other extreme, those who question the negative campaigns state that they affect democracy in several ways: it reduces the number of voters and promotes distrust in elections. They say that negative campaigning condenses opinion and reduces the subjective reasoning of the elector; denigration has asymmetric effects, and decomposition and bitterness are deep

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<sup>1</sup> The public in the United States is completely accustomed to seeing comparative advertising and contrast publicity in an aggressive and personal manner. Numerous teams from each candidate dedicate a great amount of time to find the weak points of the opponent, analyze his political career and the coherency of his personal life "(Priess, 2009: 148).. The Daisy Girl video is available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63h\\_v6uf0Ao](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63h_v6uf0Ao).

wounds that destroy personalities and put into action mechanics of revenge (Treviño et al., 2007: Laguna 48 and Becerra, 2008: 185-186).

Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary Copeland in 1989 published a study that identified 10 types of negative messages. They separated types of spots into two classes based on the observed content: 1. Contents of a political character centered on issues related to the political performance of the candidate, and 2. Personal content, focusing on the characteristics of his personality and his private and family life. When a group of voters were asked their opinion on these two great classes of spots, the answer was that they considered unsuitable those related to the characteristics of his personality and his private and family life, and relevant those that had public policy issues as the core axis. Years later, the same authors identified three modes of argument in negative publicity: 1. direct attack ads; 2. direct comparison ads, and 3. implicit comparison ads. Each of the three presents information using an inductive or deductive method: a) direct message: only attacks the opponent; b) direct comparison message: directly compare candidates with their experience, previous election results, etc., and c) messages implicit comparison: truncated syllogism is not negative in itself, but it is the interpretation that the public will assign the negative character (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 2011: 22-23).

In a study by GW Richardson, four categories of negative spots were defined: a) unbalanced; b) misleading; c) Cutthroat, and d) emotional. The “unbalanced” are defined as those with a biased argument, regardless of its veracity. The “misleading”, are characterized by the lack of credibility of the argument that makes the information presented in doubt. “cutthroats” are characterized by elements that emphasize aggression and personal attack on a candidate. Finally, the “emotional” spots frequently use arguments that appeal to emotion and lack, therefore, a rational argument regardless of its veracity (Juárez Gámiz, 2009: 118).

According to Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1992), there are four attack strategies in a political contest: 1. The appeal to the emotional and visceral to try to generate an overview of “good” and “bad”; 2. The identification of the adversary with a symbol or character that voters relate as negative; 3. The comparison that allows a candidate to be associated with something that is perceived as good, and 4. The establishment of an association or connection between unrelated images, suggesting to citizens an act of inference.

Authors like Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar (1997) express their criticism of the effects of negative political messages, arguing lower voter turnout is a result which can be considered as a threat to democracy and voters only obtain partial information of the attacked candidate; In addition, the effect depends on several factors, such as party preference and the gender of the candidate who sends the message. Thomas Patterson, following the same logic as Ansolabehere and Iyengar, states that negative campaigning discourage voters, to the extent that citizens want “less politics in their lives” (Lugo Rodríguez, 2011: 24-25).

Another author who identifies three possible negative effects that can generate this type of campaign is Merrit (1984): a) boomerang, which means that these messages could cause a rebound effect and cause more damage to the candidate who used them than to the one who was targeted; b) victim syndrome, is when voters generate feelings of empathy for the attacked candidate, c) double deterioration, occurs when the two candidates, the attacker and the attacked, have detrimental effects.

Linked with black propaganda is the “political scandal”. John B. Thompson (2001) provides a description of this phenomenon. The political scandal occurs when people who operate within the political sphere are implicated, and this has a significant impact on the relationships established within it. The use of a political scandal is part of the control strategy to achieve the symbolic power associated with reputation, prestige and trust. All three are forms of symbolic capital necessary for the exercise of political

power. In Mexico, several scandals of this nature can be recalled which were utilized in the campaigns of 2006: the gambling of a government official of the City of Mexico (with Public funds?) and the delivery of large amounts of money to officials who were also part of the government of Mexico City by the businessman Carlos Ahumada that supposedly would be used in the political campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. These videos that were presented in programs with a large national audience (Mora Heredia & Rodríguez Guillén, 2004 Carlos Ahumada: 85 -94).

Attack campaigns slander and even denigrate opponents, and can be considered as signs of anti-politics because they cause open confrontations and are often sterile-intolerance appears and exclusion of balance is present; In the end, the role of politics is discredited (Pérez Correa, 2004: 12).

Negativity was positioned in the political campaigns of 2006 as a result of a postmodern society, where there is fear of the stranger and of losing what you have - it's most common manifestation is isolation. What you want to avoid is that the one who strikes fear wins (Pérez Fernández del Castillo, 2008: 117). In this argumentative line, we should remember David Bell who said that electoral processes are linked to the ownership and possession of goods. To the extent that people have something to protect, there is an increase in their interest in participating in a political campaign. "Lopez Obrador: a danger to Mexico" campaign and its comparison to Hugo Chavez could mean, among the middle classes, a possible fear of the consequences that would entail for this sector of the population for this possible government (Kuschick, 2008: 102 and 107)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the Business Coordinating

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<sup>2</sup> By March 2006, changes occurred in the campaign team of Felipe Calderon: Francisco Ortiz was replaced as the image coordinator by Antonio Sola, who in Spain had collaborated with the Peoples party (Low Book, 2006) It is possible that along with Sola, Dick Morris has devised the aggressive campaign strategy of the PAN. We should recall that on April 3, 2006, Morris published an article in The New York Times entitled "Menace in Mexico" which in Mexico was taken up by David Brooks, from La Jornada, on April 17 of the same year

Council paid for two spots that appeared in May. While it did not mention any candidate, they talked about staying the course and the danger of changing. Other organizations such as “Arm yourself with courage and vote”, and even private citizens such as Víctor González Torres, called “Dr. Simi “, paid for TV ads against Lopez Obrador (Table 2), thereby in effect violating Articles 38 and 48, section 13 of the Federal Code of Institutions and Electoral Procedures; however, there was no penalty because the law at that time did not include mechanisms for this purpose. In summary, there was constant fear and confrontation, as was noted in the *Opinion on the final results of the election for President of the United Mexican States (Electoral Tribunal, 2006)*.

## FINAL APPROACH

Beyond the discussion of whether the effects were harmful or not of the use for promotional purposes, one thing is certain: the candidates have no other way to influence voters other than using the resource of advertising. This is emphasized over large districts which prevents complete coverage throughout the duration of the campaign. On the other hand, the spots are also the almost unique means for most of the population to discuss the proposals of candidates for elective office. It is the advertising messages and what the candidates say in the media that are about the only possibility to obtain information. Messages persuade, this is their characteristic. We are reminded of Carl I. Hovland, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, and Fred D. Sheffield, in their work “Experiments on the job in Mass Communications.” The three factors to persuasion are: 1. Exhibition 2. Reception and 3. Acceptance. The first factor relates precisely to be exposed to the media. Reception is a process of both a cognitive and emotional nature. For example: perhaps one of the things that most affected the López Obrador campaign was the phrase “Shut up, Mr. President.” The form under which the

message was given prejudiced against public opinion, because the PAN and its critics presented it as an offense to the presidential inauguration by a bigoted individual (Ramos Pérez, 2006). The last factor is the acceptance of the message; usually, the audience is receptive to the messages they are sent and that the media has previously accepted, hence persuasive communication is usually effective with uninformed people and those who do not have an established preference in an electoral event.

Finally, in a campaign voters may develop positive or negative attitudes toward a candidate on the basis of assessing signals transmitted during the period of political campaigning (Sankey Cárdenas García & Díaz, 2010: 51).

The revised electoral process demonstrates that the use of electronic advertising is the main resource of political parties and their candidates and campaigns. This observation was also confirmed when observing the various and frequent political commercials, and is corroborated by the reports on the use of electronic media that authorities had allowed after the election. All of the parties together, according to the IFE, spent 1.973 million pesos in the electoral process on the recruitment of advertising space on radio and television. 757.572 (601.689 155.883 radio and television) Spots were transmitted. This amounts to around 3,400 hours of advertising on radio and 920 on television. The parties devoted the following figures to electronic advertising: PRI, \$ 642,073,695.00; PAN, \$ 620,247,158.00; Coalition for the Good of All, \$ 575,658,364.00; New Partnership, \$ 91,251,251.00, and Alternative, \$ 44,742,067.00. The IFE also identified a total of 281,026 spots that were not reported by the political parties, which may amount to a billion unregistered pesos (Murayama Rendón, 2008: 282). There is no evidence of who, how and when these promotional ads were paid. Such amounts are not insignificant and in the last ten years over a billion dollars in electoral campaigns have been spent in Mexico and 60 percent have been used to buy time on electronic media.



We live so immersed in the “video” (Sartori, 2010: 73), because if a candidate is sold like any product, then advertising has replaced politics and it has therefore become a show. As Gordillo and Lajous (72 2007) note, “The ‘democratic’ newspeak sees politics as a market. [...] The product being sold is politics, for which it requires fundamental marketing instruments: electronic advertising and surveys “On the television screen, the life of the society is reduced to the dramatized staging of a set of images and symbols of power that are eloquent, impoverishing, and represent the political discourse (Martínez Pandiani, 2004: 55-56).

Campaign discourse has gone from the exaltation of personal virtues and the program of government to denouncement and ridicule of the other candidates based on metaphors, allegories and comparisons (with other nationals or foreign personalities, contemporary or otherwise), making an emphasis on the imagination of each elector: turning to their hopes and dreams that could never be concretized or fears that may appear in the act of the government who turns out the winner.

Candidates and parties have found that in the stimulation of emotions there is a real chance for victory in the fair election, even while knowing that what the voters can never happen in reality.

## ANEXES

**Table 1.** SPOTS of the political parties on television during the campaigns of 2006

Party	January	February	March	April	May	June	Total
PAN	1,447	2,371	2,187	3,929	7,481	22,574	39,989
% spots a month	47.35	18.43	25.37	41.91	23.78	24.88	25.66
PRI/PVEM	764	6,884	3,026	4,429	14,949	39,339	69,391
%	25	53.52	35.1	47.24	47.51	43.35	44.52
CPBT	821	3,101	2,697	847	5,767	19,844	33,077
%	26.87	24.10	31.29	9.03	18.33	21.87	21.22
Panal	24	507	685	66	3,090	8,175	12,547
%	0.79	3.94	7.95	0.7	9.82	9	8.05
Alternativa	0	0	25	104	177	547	853
%	0	0	0.3	1.11	0.56	0.6	0.55
Total (100%)	3,056	12,863	8,620	9,375	31,464	90,479	155,857

**Source:** Trejo Delarbre, 2010: 164.

**Table 2.** NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNS AND THE DECISION TO VOTE

**At the time to decide your vote,  
which of the following themes influenced your decision?**

Candidate	The comments that Lopez Obrador is a danger to Mexico	The case of Felipe Calderons brother in law	The criticisms of Lopez Obrador of President Fox, for example when he called him «chacalaca»	The comments that Felipe Calderon defends the interests of bankers and businessmen	Don't know/no answer
Calderón	52	20	50	29	35
Madrazo	27	19	23	17	24
López Obrador	18	57	24	51	36
Others	3	4	3	3	5
Total	100	100	100	100	100

**Source:** Trejo Delarbre, 2010: 179.

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