Corporatists vs. Merchandisers Six Different Campaign Styles

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If the possibility of really alternating in office is one of the last chapters of a transition to a full democracy, Mexico's transition —which seems as long as a Dickens novel printed in installments— has come to a definitive moment, a kind of dramatic climax. From a virtual single-party model in which elections, if anything, served as plebiscites, we have moved to a system of parties that allows for real competition (albeit, as we shall see later, in profoundly inequitable terms), in which not knowing who will win is an encouraging sign of a desire for change.

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The road to quality democracy presupposes changes in the behavior of the main political and social actors. One of those actors, the Mexican media have gone through profound transformations, as did the Spanish and the Chilean media before them.

In the previous order of things, the Mexican communications media followed what we could call a "closed" model: radio, television and print media owners carried on a kind of permanent, barely disguised flirtation with those in power. More than a form of totalitarian state control à la Goebbels, the relationship between the hegemonic party-government and the communications media looked like one of mutual convenience, with an absolutely necessary system of

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Vicente Fox's media campaign, simple and catchy, contrasted sharply with Labastida's more traditional image.

illicit perks given the extent of government's involvement in media activities. Electronic media licenses were granted in a totally arbitrary and discretionary fashion. The state had a monopoly over the paper industry: those were the "good old days" of the government-owned Paper Producer and Importer Corporation (Pipsa), when "[if] the government wanted to support a newspaper or magazine, it stopped charging it for paper, and likewise, when it wanted to exert pressure, the editors were simply presented with their back invoices."[1] All this, plus favors granted in cash or in kind to select pens and voices among journalists guaranteed a resigned and sometimes happy obsequiousness by the media, who had no qualms about publishing press bulletins word for word or about having their columns or editorials dictated to them from government offices.

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Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas used traditional forms of political persuasion.

This kind of thing could not go on *ad infinitum*, however. The country's political opening, timidly begun with the 1977 electoral reform, favored pluralism and with it, a gradual but palpable distancing between the media and the powers-that-be. While the effects of that opening would begin to be seen in 1988 with the popularity of the National Action Party's presidential candidate, Manuel Clouthier, and the much-debated victory of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas at the polls, the opposition parties still had to carry out their campaigns in the streets and not in the media, which were still held in check by the proverbial intimidating phone calls from government officials to city room editors and muzzled by the possibility of being hit in their pocket books.

The transition process would receive new impetus in 1991 when the electoral reforms that culminated in the creation of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) gave the political parties greater access to the media, guaranteeing their relative impartiality, even in the context of marked general inequality like the case of the 1994 federal elections. The subsequent 1996 electoral reform, a key moment for understanding political campaigns in Mexico, deepened the media's progress toward impartiality, even though it left a legacy of a kind of "political inflation": expensive campaigns and restricted access of the emerging parties to the media. Open payments gradually began to substitute the old hidden complicities as relations between the communications media and political parties became more and more subject to the logic of the market. Although electoral competition was still very unequal (the electoral system, after all, had been designed by the political parties to their specifications and went from being a monolith of one to a monolith of three in which the opportunities for founding new political forces is limited from the outset) and absurdly long electoral processes made for disproportionately large budgets that perverted competition and have led the media to be guided more by the logic of the cash register than by proposals, the government no longer controls absolutely all financial resources for political campaigns. Now it is the parties who can pay, and they have shot to the top of the media's client lists.[2]

In this new atmosphere, the print media and the radio made outstanding efforts to better reflect the diversity of the political scene and create a more serious, less officialist journalism. The reason behind this may be that both these

fields of journalism are very competitive (in Mexico City alone there are more than 25 newspapers and 20 morning radio newscasts), plus external factors (the radio earned credibility with its public spirited efforts after the 1985 earthquake, and the Pipsa monopoly finally came to an end) and the financial difficulties they both face (television accounts for about 90 percent of Mexico's advertising expenditures). Television, until very recently marked by the Televisa monopoly and its owner Emilio Azcárraga Milmo's political preferences, has advanced more slowly on the road to openness, which is extremely serious given its importance in political campaigns.

However, despite the lack of certainty in electronic media licensing and the use of government advertizing as a control mechanism by the ancien régime to keep some media alive artificially despite low circulation or ratings and practically no real market, today's government-media relationship is different. It is less characterized by the distribution of perks and privileges and more by payment for publicity campaigns.

Mexico's political and commercial opening has been accompanied by a cultural opening, the fruit of the much maligned globalization. Information about electoral experiences in other countries, together with the decline of corporatism, should translate into a general but steady trend toward making the communications media the political campaign arena par excellence. Today, in Mexico like in the rest of the world, "at least half the time of a head of state and of a party is used for 'communication.' In his court, the 'image consultant' replaces the technician, the ideologue and the literati as the favorite for the simple reason that the prince needs him all the time....The strategy of power has gone from arguments to sound bites."[3]

While publicists entered the field of political propaganda in the United States in the late 1940s, Mexico had to wait until the 1990s. In 1994, Régis Debray was already talking about a world in which political campaigns were "analyzed like a purchase [of time and space] in which you speak to the citizen as a consumer, appropriately polled, sampled, classified and listed for marketing."[4] Mexico set out on that road with very little tradition and experience of real political competition, not to mention communications strategies and techniques vis-à-vis voters. Most of our parties and candidates trusted their electoral activities to what they presumed was the strength of their leaderships or their supposedly charismatic figures. The corporatist political education of Mexican politicians

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The PRI built its campaign around mass rallies and solemn publicity.

translated into a reluctance to mold leadership to marketing, something that has only changed little by little.

That is the backdrop for the campaigns of Mexico's six presidential hopefuls: Manuel Camacho, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Vicente Fox, Francisco Labastida, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and Gilberto Rincón Gallardo. Clearly, the candidates made big efforts to veer their campaigns away from what in Mexico is known as "plaza politics," or activities characterized by enthusiastic and supposedly spontaneous support by masses of human beings organized in a corporatist way, to make them into media campaigns, directed at the citizen taken as an individual, perceived as more urbane and educated, and clear-

ly more representative of the real electorate. However, the inertia of Mexico's electoral customs and usage is difficult to overcome. One example should suffice. Better yet, why not six?

Manuel Camacho
The Risks of Personalism

Party of the Democratic Center (PCD) candidate Manuel Camacho's campaign was one of the most traditional of all. While other candidates had foreign or national advisors, creative, well known advertising executives or at least journalists or experienced audio and video producers to support them, Camacho trusted the development of his campaign activities to two things: first, the attraction that his personality could exert over the voters, and, to a lesser extent, to the votes he could get from small networks of patronage seekers, mostly street vendors organized under the banner of "The Strength of Commerce," concentrated in Mexico City.

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Manuel Camacho's campaign was unimaginative and without clear strategies.

Opinion polls and the media, however, showed that he bet wrong. In an unimaginative campaign, Camacho's team tried to spotlight him, but were unable to position him clearly: street publicity and billboards presented him as modestly triumphant, but gave no content or meaning to his face. In fact, they made no attempt to familiarize the public with his campaign slogan. His radio presence was nil, and his appearances in the printed media sporadic. His television spots, a cornerstone of his publicity campaign, were slightly more fortunate, seeking to exploit his anti-PRI stance and present him as a better alternative for change than the leading opposition candidate, Vicente Fox. However, once again, the messages did not offer the viewer concrete reasons to back up this supposedly better alternative. Camacho went to the media without a clear strategy, as though his mere presence would suffice to make his campaign a success. If we add to all this that his patronage-based constituents are very few in number and almost exclusively located in Mexico City, we can see why Camacho has been condemned to the sidelines, the victim of his own personalist campaign in which resources were scarce, followers few and the raw materials —his personal charisma— apparently lacking the attraction it once had.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas
Traditional Politics Wears Thin

Alliance for Mexico candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' campaign was also traditional,[5] but the results were slightly more successful and above all more consistent. The idea was once again to bet on the charismatic leader and corporatist mobilization; the media strategy sought merely to reflect these two crosscutting campaign themes and imbue them with the candidate's central message: the defense of nationalism.

Through 12 years of almost constant campaigning (Cárdenas has been a presidential hopeful three times and ran successfully for mayor of Mexico City in 1997), he has managed to establish himself as a paradigmatic figure in the eyes of a sector of voters. He is the symbol of an almost institutionalized opposition and an emblem for the desire for change. His ability to mobilize, in

part due to the rank and file of his own Party of the Democratic Revolution and to a lesser extent to Labor Party members, is considerable, frequently making his public rallies newsworthy. However, his attraction is limited and what gave his campaign consistency also kept it from surpassing his initial "ceiling." The Alliance for Mexico candidate's campaign strategists bet on reminding the electorate of what it already knows: that Cárdenas has been a leader for more than two administrations. What they did not achieve was a proposal more identifiable than a catalogue of nationalist good intentions or a renewed image, given that his is wearing increasingly thin. Creativity was scanty; the efforts were confusing (the central slogan and graphic identity changed several times during the campaign); and the overall effect was tedious and lukewarm. Cárdenas' campaign used traditional forms of political persuasion in excess, and as a result, bored an electorate that identifies him less and less as a fresh alternative.

Vicente Fox
Politics as Publicity

Of all the presidential hopefuls, Vicente Fox was the only one whose career had been more centered in business than in the political arena. A former top executive of Coca-Cola's Mexican subsidiary, Fox was not only well versed in the universe of marketing, but also attempted to incorporate into his political vision concepts of entrepreneurial efficiency like "total quality." He sought to present himself as a practical, simple man and a good administrator dedicated to defeating Institutional Revolutionary Party candidate Francisco Labastida, presented by the Fox camp as the heir to 70 years of corruption, dishonesty and shady deals. The dream Fox tried to paint was of a Mexico without the PRI in the presidential residence of Los Pinos, which presumably would make the country more prosperous and productive.

The Alliance for Change has little in the way of a corporatist tradition.[6] Therefore its candidate bet on merging Peronist-like populism with the most up-to-date marketing techniques to turn himself into the providential man, a paradigmatic figure who could embody the citizenry's dissatisfaction with the hegemonic party's performance and its yearning for concrete results. Vicente Fox's campaign centered on the media and, as such, was successful. He maintained good relations with the press; his publicity was simple and catchy. His strategy seemed fortunate, achieving broad coverage, clear positioning and an attractive image. However, many of the more enlightened sectors of society criticized him for being a chameleon. And, in effect, his public statements were contradictory; his political proposal, vague; his solutions verging on pure effect-seeking. Fox sacrificed substance to form, allowing advertising to take the place of politics, which may well have cost him dearly in a context of out-and-out electoral war. He did, however, avoid paying old political bills.

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Gilberto Rincón Gallardo was the only candidate who admitted publicly he was not expecting to win.

Francisco Labastida
When the Sum Is Less than Its Parts

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the political force that has governed Mexico for

more than 70 years, is today on the receiving end of national discontent. It is a traditional party with a solid territorial structure built on immense patronage networks. It also has government support which, although somewhat diminished by the new conditions of electoral equity, still counts for a lot. For the vast majority of the population, the PRI's image is not only bad, but seemingly irreparable. Its corporatized rank and file, although very large, was not enough to guarantee an automatic victory at the polls, and it therefore had to resort to an intense media campaign. In previous electoral years —the most representative of which is the presidential campaign of the *annus horribilis*, 1994—[7] the PRI has made stability its mainstay in the elections. However, given that strategy's diminishing returns (in 1997, it was not able to preserve its traditional congressional majority), Francisco Labastida opted for boarding the train of change and offered up his version with an air of certainty. The new plan consisted of mixing the patronage tradition with media innovation. However, the results were not altogether satisfactory. Caught between making use of PRI strongmen who could bring in hundreds of thousands of votes through their patronage networks but whose presence would hurt his public image, and a media campaign that tried to remake the party image into one of political legitimacy and internal democracy (concerned about a vacuous but exceedingly confident Vicente Fox), Labastida ended up running a kind of mixed "non-campaign" that used corporatism and marketing simultaneously. It was built around mass rallies and solemn publicity and marked by his reluctance to face up to other candidates in public fora. His image was grey; his discourse, that of a victim; his proposals, those of a renovator, but incongruent.

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Porfirio Muñoz Ledo resigned as PARM candidate and joined Fox's team.

Porfirio Muñoz Ledo
When Charisma Isn't Everything

Perhaps the least fortunate of all the campaigns was Porfirio Muñoz Ledo's, running for an alliance of the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM) and New Republic, a social democratic current that Muñoz Ledo created when he became dissatisfied with his former party, the PRD. When he accepted the PARM nomination, the then-flamboyant candidate enjoyed the support of about 7 percent of voters polled. This was the product of his image as a cultivated, well-spoken politician, a good negotiator, tempered by his experience as the coordinator of the PRD congressional caucus. Later on, a month before the elections, opinion polls gave him only 0.5 percent of voter support, a depressing result attributable to a great extent to the disorganization of his campaign.

Since the PARM is a weak party, virtually without any structure or ideological basis, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo decided to bet everything on his personal charisma. He is, indeed, respected, at least among more educated sectors of society, for his intellectual capability and celebrated for his frequent bon-mots. His was eminently a media campaign, although plagued by severe budget shortages; initially he tried to capitalize on his own personality traits, although too obviously and directly, without really using marketing techniques or an attractive, creative propos-

al, but using a traditional approach to the media. As a result, the voters were presented with an overly solemn, often impulsive candidate who, at the end of the day, bored them with attempts to appeal to the need to strengthen the rule of law without ever making concrete proposals about how to do it. In May, Muñoz Ledo and Vicente Fox came to a kind of informal "convergence" pact and, later, after a political scandal, Muñoz Ledo's relations with the PARM leadership became tense almost to the breaking point. His remaining a candidate became increasingly untenable, a sad, unexpected end for a charismatic, often brilliant politician. At the beginning of June, then, he resigned his candidacy in favor of Vicente Fox.

Gilberto Rincón Gallardo Against All Odds

The campaign of the Social Democracy Party (PDS) candidate achieved a good combination of a solid, modern political program that dealt with twenty-first century topics like sustainable development, the new family and minority rights, with a reasonable, innovative use of marketing techniques. Social Democracy is not a party with a large corporatist base, and, as a matter of fact, part of its strategy has been to decry other parties' use of patronage networks. Therefore, Gilberto Rincón Gallardo decided to invest almost all his scant resources in a media campaign aimed at making the defense of women's rights, and sexual, ethnic, religious or political minorities the party's main campaign planks.

Rincón Gallardo faced a great challenge: a candidate seen more as an analyst than a political actor, he decided to organize his campaign around a fairly radical program, including decriminalization of abortion, legalization of drug consumption to solve the drug trafficking problem, etc. These proposals were couched in attractive language and targeted at a very specific segment of the electorate: young urban voters with an above average sociocultural level. The strategy was successful, particularly after his performance during the first presidential candidates' debate, in which he came across as the "defender of the minorities" and as an upright, coherent, responsible politician. This put him in fourth place among voters. Gilberto Rincón Gallardo was also the only candidate nominated by one of the new parties who admitted publicly that he was not expecting to win the race and who concentrated all his promotional efforts on what he considered a real need: that the democratic left, willing to negotiate, get to Congress. "There are many more than two of us" was one of his campaign slogans;[8] another was "Vote Differently," referring to the polarization that the PRI and PAN candidates generated as the front-runners. VM

Notes

[1] Raúl Trejo Delarbre, *Volver a los medios: de la crítica a la ética* (Mexico City: Ediciones Cal y Arena, 1997), p. 227.

[2] "From 1997, a campaign year, to 1998, when there were no elections, the earnings of seven radio networks with more than 720 stations dropped more than 50 percent." Javier Corral Hurtado, "Breve historia de un intento legislativo," *Diálogo y Debate*, year 2, no. 8 (Mexico City), p. 21.

[3] Régis Debray, *Vida y muerte de la imagen: historia de la mirada en Occidente* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1994), p. 280.

[4] Ibid., p. 282.

[5] The Alliance for Mexico was a coalition of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Labor Party (PT), the Party of the Nationalist Society (PSN), the Party of the Social Alliance (PAS) and Convergence for Democracy (CD).

[6] Fox headed up the Alliance for Change, a coalition made up of the inexplicable marriage of the National Action Party (PAN) to the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM), the country's only environmentalist party.

[7] The authors refer to 1994, the year of, among other things, the emergence of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas and the assassinations of then-PRI-presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio and José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, the PRI general secretary. [Editor's Note.]

[8] This phrase comes from a well known Latin American 1960s protest song that was somewhat of an anthem for the left of the time. [Translator's Note.]