

# Votes, the Media and Campaigns

## Four Myths About Communications and Politics

Raúl Trejo Delarbre\*



PRI/Cuatoscuro

Today, no national political campaign can be successful without the broadcast media. Candidates and parties, governments and institutions all seek attention in the media to reach society. Thus, they subordinate what they want to say to television and radio formats. So, they end up saying only what they are allowed to say.

The media has monopolized the public arena to such an extent that its approval seems indispensable for the success of any effort at publicity and campaigning. As everyone knows, broadcast media companies shade, temper and even determine the public affairs agenda according to their interests.

But it is one thing for television and radio to be irreplaceable in forging consensus in contemporary societies, and it is quite another for them to be so omnipotent that the rest of the powers in society (state, political, judicial and formal powers) should be subordinate to them. The power of the media is important, but it is often magnified out of ignorance, obfuscation or just getting too comfortable.

Most state officials, political leaders and legislators believe, at least in Mexico, that the media has unlimited power. They forget that in societies like ours, the media is, or should be, limited by legal frameworks, social demands and the action of state institutions. Together with this, they overlook the existence of other sources of information and persuasion —social and family surroundings, the context, experi-

---

\* Researcher at the UNAM Institute for Social Research. [rtrejo@servidor.unam.mx](mailto:rtrejo@servidor.unam.mx)

ence, etc.— that citizens pay as much, or more, attention to than the media.

Precisely because it has singular, and habitually excessive, power and because it has a daily, intense capability to influence society, it is important that the broadcast media be competitive and plural and that both the state and society itself continually make demands upon it. When this does not happen, like in Mexico, then the broadcast media behaves as if it were a superlative power.

It is natural for communications companies to want to dominate like they have in Mexico today with a power that often subjugates governments, parliaments and institutions. And it is not often that those profiting from power want to get rid of or stop exercising it. The most disturbing thing in the Mexican case is that among what some call the political class and, in general, in the state institutions responsible for organizing and guaranteeing society's ability to get along, the fear of the media amplifies these companies' already important power. Particularly during the administration of President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), the federal government's subjection to the ambitions of Mexico's two television monopolies, the reluctance of all the political parties to meet the challenge that they mean for democracy in the country and the docility the vast majority of federal deputies and senators *vis-à-vis* the televi-

sion corporations have been part of the causes of the state's paralysis and subordination to the power of the media.

Within this panorama, it may be useful to delimit what the mass media is capable of—and what it is not—with regard to electoral processes. In the following pages, I will analyze four myths that are frequently repeated about the relationship between the media and politics.

#### FIRST MYTH: ELECTIONS ARE DECIDED IN THE MEDIA

Present almost in every public space today, the mass media has undeniable, often unavoidable, weight in forging public opinion. Above all, the media is the most important conduit for people finding out about public affairs. What candidates say and do during a political campaign is made known through the mass media before any other means.

Today, television is the main source of socialization of public affairs. People are informed by it although they later supplement the knowledge gained there by consuming other media and additional spaces of socialization, depending on the groups and relational circuits each individual has.

In addition to information, as we all know, the mass media generates a large number of opinions about the facts they inform their audiences of.

The very selection and editing of that information implies preferences, decisions and biases in the presentation of public affairs. And, of course, the political opinions of presenters, reporters and announcers, whether expressed explicitly or not, influence one way or another in the value judgments people make about these affairs.

According to *Reforma* newspaper polls, during Mexico's 2000 electoral season, 66 percent of citizens said they heard the news on television, but only 47 percent said they believed "a great deal" or "something" of what they heard on those broadcasts. This is what Alejandro Moreno, the head of the polling process called a "credibility deficit." "At least one-fifth of the electorate gets its information about politics from television, but people do not believe what they see and hear," he said.<sup>1</sup> And the importance of other sources for finding out about public affairs but also to discuss them—that is, to forge an opinion about them—is so great that it is noteworthy how underestimated they are in political parties' campaign strategy design.

Campaigning fundamentally based on merchandising in the large mass media often underestimates the role of conversations in the family and on the job, among other places. On election day in 2000, the *Reforma* newspaper reported that exit polls showed that 64 percent of voters had heard "a great deal" or "something" about the news thanks to their personal relationships. These answers led *Reforma's* polling specialist to conclude that, "Conversations with the family and friends are the second most credible source of information for Mexican voters: 44 percent said they believed a great deal or something about pres-

The media has monopolized the public arena to such an extent that its approval seems indispensable for the success of any effort at publicity and campaigning.

Precisely because it has singular, and habitually excessive, power and it has a daily, intense capability to influence society, it is important that the broadcast media be competitive and plural.

idential candidates, compared with 47 percent who believed television news; 41 percent, radio news; 40 percent, newspapers; and 37 percent, other people who are not relatives or friends. Almost certainly, however, what these voters talk about or find out from friends and relatives is a reproduction and, in the best of cases, a reinterpretation of what was seen and heard on television.”<sup>2</sup> This process of reinterpretation opens an important margin for citizens to have opinions that do not necessarily agree with the ones the mass media is trying to induce.

It is clear that the media has an influence, but from there to say that its influence is so strong that it ends up defining election results in contemporary societies, there is a distance well worth very prudent contemplation. The mass media is no doubt one of the essential factors in defining political opinions, though not the only one and, on occasions, not even the most decisive one.

#### SECOND MYTH: THE MEDIA HAS THE SAME INFLUENCE THROUGHOUT SOCIETY

In any mass society, media audiences are, by definition, heterogeneous. People have different interests, preferences and contexts. That is why research into the media and its effects has been able to say, as Mexican analyst Francisco

de Jesús Aceves clearly explains, “The audience is not a monolithic conglomerate. Quite to the contrary, there are important sexual, age and socio-cultural differences. This diversity will also determine the media’s capacity to influence.”<sup>3</sup>

For several decades now, the most serious studies in the field of mass communications have rejected improvised or hurried interpretations that attributed the media with a capability of manipulating and influence so overwhelming that, as some authors supposed, its content could be just injected into people like with a hypodermic syringe. At this point in communications research, it has been established that the media of course has enormous influence on society’s behavior and opinions, but always in accordance with the circumstances of each segment of its audience and, naturally, according to the circumstances and the intensity of exposure.

Depending on their content, some messages will have more influence among women than men and others will be more persuasive among young people or the unemployed, for example. Still others will have scant influence in a society saturated by content of all kinds, among which those of a political nature get mixed up in a sea of offers, incitements and media demands. So, supposing that a message designed to prompt intense impres-

sions or reactions will be able to change people’s vote is a way of overestimating the effect the media has on electoral processes.

#### THIRD MYTH: ELECTORAL PROPAGANDA DOES NOT COMPROMISE PARTIES

In 2006 the Mexican state, through the Federal Electoral Institute, will earmark almost 4.2 billion pesos in contributions for national political parties’ operating and campaign costs. The decision that the state finances the largest part of party expenditures is one of the key norms that this country has managed to establish in electoral matters. Because they depend basically on a state subsidy, the parties are safe from the risk of being funded by illegal or extra-legal groups. When private and/or unregistered backing exceeds legal limits, the parties can be sanctioned. This happened to the Institutional Revolutionary Party and the National Action Party, which were fined about one billion pesos and half a billion pesos, respectively, because of irregularities discovered by electoral authorities in the cases known as Pemexgate and the “Friends of Fox”.

Together with safeguards like this, being funded with tax monies has been one of the most important guarantees of political party independence. However, seen from another perspective, being given large sums of money has caused the parties’ growing dependence on the media. Because they have large sums of money—which once they are legally registered they no longer attempt to get for themselves because it is one of the prerogatives they obtain from the state—the parties can buy sizeable

It is natural for communications companies to want to dominate like they have in Mexico today with a power that often subjugates governments, parliaments and institutions.

quantities of publicity spots in the media, particularly the broadcast media. This right, part of the rules of equality in Mexico's electoral processes, hypothetically allows political messages to be more widely and better known by the citizenry. But it also has at least three perverse consequences.

The first is the preeminence of media buys over other kinds of political activity. The media message allows the parties and their candidates to reach more people with less effort. But the effects of campaigning at a distance are not always better than the work done close up in public meetings or thanks to other kinds of contact with the citizenry.

In the second place, the supremacy of media ads molds campaigns according to the formats and demands of the electronic media, to the degree that campaign speeches, statements, actions and proposals tend to be reduced to extremely short phrases, sound bites, so concise that it is impossible to express the government project behind them. This style is often prejudicial to the profundity of the political discourse.

A third result of the preponderance of the media over other political tools is the construction of a new relationship based on commercial interests between parties and media corporations. Having vast sums of money to buy ads and competing for air time turn the parties into television and radio

customers —spending in the printed media is often substantially less— and they stop acting as the institutional intermediaries of dialogue that under other conditions they often are. This move from being an institutional actor to being a customer of a private company has political consequences when the parties and the media corporations negotiate the purchase of election ads with agreements that go beyond the simple acquisition of space at publicly known prices. In Mexico, for example, the most important television and radio networks frequently offer parties space in addition to what they have bought for electoral ads: interviews on news programs, favorable commentary by informational program hosts, friendly treatment for their candidates on talk shows, and even preferential treatment of their interests in the publication of polls are all part of what the media offers the parties so that they spend their considerable funds with them.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, Mexican parties will invest between 60 percent and 70 percent of their federal campaign funds in ad buys, fundamentally from the broadcast media.

#### FOURTH MYTH: MORE PRESENCE IN THE MEDIA LEADS TO A HIGHER VOTE COUNT

When they find it easier to spend tax monies on ad buys than making an

effort at other ways of doing politics, the parties are feeding a grievous and, to a certain extent, deceptive vicious cycle: since they are convinced of the supremacy of media publicity, they earmark increasing amounts of funds to it. And given that that investment makes for expanded presence on television and radio, the citizenry and political leaders are feeding the omnipresence of the media in public affairs.

In each of Mexico's national elections, at least since the end of the 1980s, it has been shown that there is not necessarily a direct correlation between a party or candidate's presence in the mass media and their vote count.

In 1988, we began a detailed review of the space Mexico City's main dailies dedicated to national parties' campaigns on a significant sample of dates. The PRI presidential campaign got almost 55 percent of the coverage in those papers; the PAN, 12.3 percent; and the left coalition known as the National Democratic Front (FDN), 17.4 percent. Nevertheless, on election day, official figures put their vote count at 51 percent, 16.8 percent and 27.6 percent respectively.

In the same year, a group of researchers from the University of Guadalajara measured the air time the two main national news broadcasts gave to the presidential campaigns. The coverage was so unilateral that PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari received 92 percent of the air time on those programs. Manuel Clouthier, of the PAN, received only 3.5 percent, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the FDN less than 4 percent. However, the official vote count for the PAN was almost five times greater than the percentage of the time its candidate received on the daily TV news, and that of Cárdenas was seven times higher.<sup>5</sup>

A result of the preponderance of the media over other political tools is the construction of a new relationship based on commercial interests between parties and media corporations.

In the 1994 presidential elections, the PRI received 32 percent of the air time dedicated to the campaign on the two highest rated national TV news programs. It also received more than 34 percent of the time on radio and television news programs throughout the country and 42 percent of the print space in a sample of Mexico City dailies. According to official figures, Ernesto Zedillo, the PRI candidate, received 50.18 percent of the vote.

The PAN presidential candidate, Diego Fernández de Cevallos, was given 17 percent of the air time on the two main news programs, 19 percent on radio and TV news programs nationwide and 12.3 percent of the space in Mexico City dailies. His vote count was 26.7 percent.

Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas received 19 percent of the coverage in the two main TV news broadcasts, 23 percent on television and radio nationwide and 21.3 percent of the space in the Mexico City print media, but only got 17 percent of the vote.

In other words, the PRI and PAN candidates got a higher percentage of the vote than the percentage of their coverage in the broadcast and print media. But the PRD hopeful had more presence in the media than at the polling booth.

The same thing happened in the 2000 presidential elections. PRI candidate Francisco Labastida cornered

almost 40 percent of the air time dedicated to presidential campaigns on national radio and television newscasts. He got more coverage than Vicente Fox, the candidate of the coalition headed by the National Action Party, who received 27.4 percent. Fox got a little more coverage on the two most important national television newscasts: 30.7 percent versus Labastida's 28.1 percent. But at the ballot box, Fox received 42.5 percent of the vote, while the PRI candidate got 36.1 percent.

PRD candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas received 20.1 percent of television and radio time nationwide in those elections, 23 percent of the two main telecasts and slightly less than 17 percent of the national vote.

Fox, the winner of the election, received 12 percentage points more in votes than the percentage of the coverage he got on the two main television newscasts and 15 points more than his share of the coverage on radio and television news programs nationwide.

Labastida received eight percent more votes than the coverage he received on the two main TV newscasts, but almost four points less than his coverage on radio and television news programs nationwide. This greater presence on those programs did not jibe with the votes he would get.

Cárdenas and his campaign had decreasing media yields if we evaluate them in the light of his results at the

ballot box. His vote count was 6 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively, under the coverage he received on the two main television newscasts and on radio and TV news programs nationwide.

This data deserves further analysis. But we hope that the comments in this article suffice to show that in Mexican electoral campaigns, more space in the media has not necessarily meant more votes on election day. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alejandro Moreno, *El votante mexicano. Democracia, actitudes políticas y conducta electoral* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003), p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco de Jesús Aceves González, "La influencia de los medios en los procesos electorales. Una panorámica desde la perspectiva de la sociología empírica," *Comunicación y Sociedad* no. 18 and 19 (Guadalajara), May-December 1993, p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> Media corporations can make these offers in exchange for other services by political parties. In March 2006, Televisa proposed preferential treatment for PRI and PAN presidential candidates if their senators voted in favor of legislative reform favoring the company's technological and financial expansion. Several senators from these parties denounced this deal even though the reform, known as the "Televisa Law" passed with the vote of the majority of PRI and PAN legislators. Testimony of this exchange of media protection for legislative favors was published by Senator Manuel Bartlett Díaz in the article "Cómo fue y será esa ley" (What Happened and What that Law Will Be Like) in the *Enfoque* supplement of the Mexico City daily *Reforma* on April 9, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> These figures and those that follow, as well as the methodology used to arrive at them and the complete series of information obtained in the research on media coverage of Mexican elections in 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997 and 2000 can be found in Raúl Trejo Delarbre, *Mediocracia sin mediaciones. Prensa, televisión y elecciones* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2001).