

## **THE INCORPORATION OF AMERICAN-STYLE CAMPAIGN PRACTICES IN MEXICO: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE 1988, 1994 and 2000 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS**

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The present essay will try to answer to what extent and why have Mexican campaigns incorporated American style practices and become media-centred? For doing this I will argue that Mexican politics has progressively included American style campaigning and that these practices have been easily incorporated because of Mexico's recent structural changes. In the first place, this will be framed in the current debate between Americanization and Modernization (Plasser and Plasser. 2002; Swanson and Mancini. 1996; Blumler and Gurevitch. 2001). This will be followed by a description of some of the most important structural changes in Mexico that have helped in the implementation of American-style techniques. Then, to determine to what extent campaigns have been modified in Mexico, this essay will focus on three of Americanization's key characteristics and analyze them in the context of the 1988, 1994 and 2000 election campaigns. Firstly it will look at the increase in the use of political marketing in campaigns. Secondly it will examine the progression towards media-centred campaigns, specifically in relation to television. And thirdly, it will look at their professionalization. Finally, the essay will make a warning. Despite of what this '3 concepts and 3 elections sample' might suggest, the increasing use of American style campaign practices is not only the consequence of internal structural changes (modernization) nor eventually leads to a full adoption of US style campaigning. It is true that internal political and economical factors were relevant and that the incorporation of these techniques has grown since 1988. However the incorporation of American style practices has also to be explained by diffusion and by hybridization, especially in the Mexican context.

### **Modernization vs. Americanization**

The increasing similarity of political campaigns and the growing incorporation of American-style campaign practices around the world have lead to the idea that campaigns have become 'Americanized'. These practices consist in having media-centred (Mancini. 2004:32)<sup>2</sup> money driven (Scammell. 1995: 288), personalized (Plasser and Plasser, 2002: 70) and professionalized campaigns (Scammell, 1997:1) that use techniques similar to consumer product marketing (Mancini, 2004: 26).

This Americanization process, in turn, has been explained in many different ways, however the concept still needs to be complemented. While some view Americanization as the result of US cultural imperialism and as the result of pure external domination (Schiller. 1969; Boyd-Barrett. 1977; in Hallin and Mancini. 2004: 26); others explain it in the context of globalization with “a set of interactions and interdependencies among different countries” (Tomlinson. 1991, in Hallin Mancini. 2004:27). However, all these definitions somehow imply that Americanization is a process that comes from outside. Therefore, and since the diffusion of these practices can’t be said to be almost in the hands of external forces, the term ‘modernization’ has been proposed.

‘Modernization’ has been proposed as “the deeper meaning of Americanization” (Hallin and Mancini. 2004:40) and it explains the use of US style campaign practices “as a result of the transition of communication practices” (Norris, in Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 69) derived from “an ongoing (...) structural change in politics and society” (Hallin and Mancini. 2004:40; Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 16). However, this approach also needs to be complemented, changes in political communication are not only rooted in endogenous processes of social change (Hallin and Mancini. 2004:28) but are also explained by external influences. Therefore, this could be complemented to “include the adoption, selection or adaptation of American style practices” (Blumler and Gurevitch in Plasser and Plasser. 2002:20), which corresponds to the processes of diffusion and hybridization outlined by Plasser and Plasser (2002) which will shed some light to this essay.

### **Mexico’s structural changes**

“If political communication is being transformed, this cannot be understood without reference to the collapse of the old political order” (Hallin and Mancini. 2004: 29)

In a period of two decades Mexico’s politics and economy were completely transformed. Firstly, Mexico, once an authoritarian regime characterised by uncompetitive elections and limited freedom of expression turned into a liberal democracy with competing political parties. For Mexico, democratization specifically meant having free and fair elections (Lujambio. 2000) and because of this a lot of

emphasis was put in campaigns, making them more open and lengthier and giving political parties more money (Woldenberg, 1999: 5) and less restrictions for campaigning, such as with the possibility to buy TV time. This process of political liberalization started in 1988 and it's said to have finished in 2000 with the ending of the 71-year PRI rule with the victory of Vicente Fox, the opposition's candidate.

Secondly, Mexico went from being under the protectionist ISI<sup>3</sup> model to being an open free market economy. At the same time, it passed from having an economy almost entirely run by the government to an almost private economy; naturally this also had an impact on the media system. The media passed from being either owned or influenced by the hegemonic party and from serving for some propaganda purposes to being autonomous and privately owned. At the same time the privatization and deregulation of the economy and the media system allowed for having more TV channels and for having more competition between them.

These processes of political and economic structural change in Mexico brought with them a new reality. This new reality was marked by more open, individualistic and market-oriented citizens; the expansion of the media, especially of television; the commercial organization of the media and its more autonomous role; the increased competition in the campaign arena; the decline in party identification and the decline of ideology; the increased voter volatility; the increasingly narrowness of electoral results and the growth in the length of campaigns, amongst others. These, in turn, facilitated the incorporation of US campaign practices (Wring, 1990; Scammel, 1995; Foster and Muste, 1992; et.al.)

### **Political Marketing**

The use of political marketing or the increase in the use of marketing techniques for campaigns has increased considerably in Mexico. Techniques such as “segmentation of the electoral market, strategic positioning, survey-based development of messages, opposition research and excessive use of focus groups” (Plasser, 2002: 3) have been increasingly employed in Mexican campaigns. This has appeared as a response to the increased voter volatility, the decline of partisan identification; “as party loyalties have eroded and electoral volatility has risen, the concept of ‘selling politics’ has been

gradually replaced by a political marketing approach” (Plasser. 2002: 3) and due to the increased competition in political campaigns. This new setting of uncertain and competitive campaigns and undecided voters has made it harder for political parties and candidates to win elections, therefore creating the need of using ever more professional tools to win. In this context, market research and strategies have been increasingly used for persuading voters and for discovering their motivations and desires (Scammel. 1995: 270).

As evidence of the Americanization of campaigns, political marketing, and specifically the use of polling techniques, has grown in Mexico in the period that includes the 1988, 1994 and 2000 presidential elections. Not coincidentally, this whole process coincides with Mexico’s democratization and opening to freedom of expression. In Mexico, the national media first used polling techniques to predict the results of a presidential election in 1988 (Gamboa in Camp. 1996: 18). However these polls were not many and at the same time those that were independent were “overshadowed and discredited by the government” (Gamboa in Camp. 1996: 18). Therefore although they appeared for the first time in 1988, polls were not very important. In fact polling “did not exercise nearly the level of comparable influence that it plays in U.S. politics until the 1994 presidential campaign, at which time numerous polling agencies (...) became involved in this process” (Camp. 1996: 1). In this year, coincidentally, Mexico held its first ‘democratic’ elections conducted by an autonomous electoral authority and scrutinized by many electoral observers (Carrillo. 2003: 62) which also permitted a more open climate for the conduction and publication of polls. However it was not until 2000 when polls were used for purposes other than measuring voting intention, “because of heightened electoral competition and a more attentive voting public, politicians decided that it was necessary to gather reliable and accurate information about voters” (Rottinghaus. 2005: 1). Furthermore, “the use of polling to shape and control public opinion was a key element of the Fox campaign's electoral strategy” (Rottinghaus, 2005: 1). Also in that year there was such an increase in the use of these methods that the campaign was defined as being a “war of surveys” (Ocampo. 2003, in Rottinghaus, 2005: 2)

### **Media-Centred**

In Mexico the role of the media in campaigning (and specially television) has also increased. In general, media has become “an increasingly central social institution” (Mancini: 33) and in Mexico it has significantly replaced family, church, school and other institutions of cultural socialization from their original central places (Esteinou, 1998:4). In relation to political communication, this expansion of the media has come to be due to the multiplication of channels, the fragmentation of audiences (Blulmer. 389), increased competition, distrust in political parties and the decline in party strength and partisan attachment (Rottinghaus. 2005:8); “the decline of political parties as organizations effective at mobilizing large numbers of campaigns workers and voters has contributed to a greater reliance on mass-media” (Foster and Muste. 1992:16) Particularly in Mexico this growth in media-centred campaigns has been closely intertwined with the emergence of media’s commercial based system and the more autonomous role it has played in the country. In Mexico, economic liberalization brought with it the privatization of most of the state owned media which, along the media that was already private, became increasingly independent and critical as well very important in the democratization process.

In Mexico, campaigns have increasingly become media-centred, specifically in relation to television. Actually, in the described period we could see a transition from television not being relevant for the election campaign (1988) to a point where it became its main medium (2000), with the 1994 campaign being in the middle. Although parts of the 1988 campaign were held on TV this was not very important for the campaign strategy. Rather, political parties campaigned using mainly traditional techniques as door-to-door canvassing, parades and rallies. Furthermore, in 1988 the media and television were mostly under government control; Mexico had 3 national chains, 2 of which were owned by the government, and a third one (Televisa) which was private but not independent. As an example, during the 1988 campaign the owner of Televisa, Emilio Azcárraga, declared that him and his company were “soldados del PRI” – soldiers of the ruling party. Later on, by 1994 television was already private but not completely free with the government exercising political and economical influence on it (Camp. 1996: 3). However, in spite of this, its influence had grown, an example of this being the holding of “the first nationally broadcast debate in the country’s history” (De Palma. 1994:1). Finally by the year 2000 television was very important for campaigns; political parties now could openly criticize the regime through television spots and could

advertise freely. Additionally, this medium was instrumental for the success of Vicente Fox's triumph in the 2000 campaign (Rottinghaus. 2005:6). The growing importance of television in Mexico also coincided with the country's transition to democracy. The autonomy of the media,<sup>4</sup> for example, is both an aspect and a symbol of democracy itself. Television was a very important tool for the democratization of Mexico which probably also explains its expansion and growing impact.

### **Professionalization**

In Mexico, the professionalization of campaigns, understood as the expanding reliance on consultants (Plasser and Plasser. 2002), technical experts (Swanson and Mancini. 2006: 384), and special advisers from the media as well as from polling and advertisement (Plasser and Plasser. 2002) has increased. This has appeared due to a number of reasons. It is due to the lengthening of campaigns that gives the opportunity to constantly prepare better; the increasing competition in the campaign arena which means that parties have to recur to additional and more professional techniques in order to win; the increase in the use of media and marketing for campaigns, "both the media and the marketing revolution of campaigns lead to an increasing professionalization of campaign practices" (Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 4); the fact that Mexico is a "democracy with loosening partisan attachments" (Rottinghaus. 2005:3) which means that there are more undecided voters that need ever more professional tools to be conquered; and "the increased technical sophistication required to handle modern campaigns that has led to less reliance on party regulars to perform party tasks" (Foster and Muste. 1992:18).

The analysis of the 1988, 1994 and 2000 campaigns demonstrates that professionalization, as a component of Americanization, has increased in Mexico. While in 1988 neither the ruling party nor the main opposition parties relied on professional consultants, publicity advisers, public relation or image experts, the 2000 campaign was mostly about this, with the 1994 campaign seeing a limited participation of special advisers. In 1988 campaign strategy was outlined by party leaders and implemented by party members; politicians prepared the speeches, scripts and TV appearances of the candidates, there was no specific focus on image or public relations and there was no real competition between political parties at that time, therefore eliminating the need for specialists. Then the 1994 campaign saw the emergence of

marketing and image specialists. At this point some aspects of politics (mainly the ruling party's social programmes) started to be advertised, therefore creating the need to hire specialists that knew about television and publicity. At the same time, the holding of the country's first televised debate moved the main political parties to hire image specialists so they could convince the electorate of voting for them. As for the 2000 campaign, since it was more media-centred, personalized, used more marketing strategies and had more negative attacks, the use of professionals was crucial, actually a "Guerra de asesores" – 'war of advisors' was lived during its last months. Furthermore in the year 2000 we could see an active involvement of American specialists in the campaign teams for the two main contenders; while Fox relied on Dick Morris (Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 23) and Rob Allyn (Camil. 2008:1), Francisco Labastida (the PRI candidate) relied on James Carville (Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 23). In this respect the Americanization of campaigns is evident; whereas in 1988 campaigns were organized by party members and politicians, in 2000 campaigns had even the active participation of US advisers. Finally it is important to say that this growth in the use of professionals has been closely related, and not coincidentally, to Mexico's process of democratization (and therefore to the increased competition between parties) and the emergence of its new media system.

### **Diffusion Model**

In spite of the evidence presented above 'Americanization' is not only the consequence of the internal structural changes (modernization) that Mexico underwent in the last two decades nor that it implies the progressive homogenisation of campaign practices. The incorporation of political marketing and professionalized and media centred campaigns is also the consequence of transnational diffusion (Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 17) and can imply the "direct imitation (...), the selective importation and adoption (...) or the adaptation of American practices to an existing set of practices, assimilating new modes of operation into older ones" (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001 in Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 20).

Mexico's internal structural factors were important causes of change for the use of American campaign techniques, however, the process also incorporated diffusion, "it is clear that there is a massive global interest in U.S. campaigns" (Scammell. 1997: 1).

The US is both the pioneer “the media revolution took place first in the US” (Plasser and Plasser. 2002:1) and the current leader “the U.S. leads the world in the development and application of high tech tools for campaigning” (Katz. 1971) in campaign techniques and strategies, which implies that many political parties and candidates from other countries, including Mexico, copy and adapt its models.

Also and in spite of the evidence for the growing incorporation of US style campaign techniques in Mexico from 1988 to 2000, Americanization is not overwhelming in the country. “The diffusion of US-American campaign and marketing techniques is not a linear process resulting in a uniform standardization of international campaign practices” (Caspi. 1996:174-176 in Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 18) In fact, Americanization was adapted to the country’s specific context, resulting in a hybridization of campaign styles (Plasser and Plasser. 19). As evidence of this, traditional campaign styles are still present in Mexico; “recent examples from Mexican campaigns provide evidence for the importance of networks of supporters, local vote-brokers, motivated activists, direct contact with voters and constituencies and traditional forms of mobilization” (Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 349). Even the highly Americanized 2000 election and the highly Americanized Vicente Fox used both styles of campaigning, “the significant increase in Fox’s recognition was the result of a massive public rally in Mexico City (...) Fox and his team were so pleased with the results that Fox suggested that he might decide to repeat this kind of rally every single month” (Rottinghaus. 2005:5).

## **Conclusion**

Mexican political communication has changed since the last two decades and has been swept in the direction of what is labelled as ‘Americanization’. The 1988, 1994 and 2000 presidential elections in Mexico bear witness to this process of expanding use of US-like practices in campaigns, specifically in relation to three of its key aspects: political marketing, professionalization and media-centeredness. The increasing use, impact and importance of polls, consultants and televisions are evidence of this change.

In the first place this change can be explained by internal conditions. In Mexico, the Americanization of campaigns was closely intertwined with very important structural



changes. These modified the country's political, social and economical system and transformed a closed authoritarian regime into an open emerging liberal democracy. These processes brought with them an increase in political competition, the expansion and autonomy of the media, the decline of partisan identification and increased voter volatility, which among other changes, facilitated the incorporation of US style campaign practices.

However important, this Americanization process can't be solely explained by the "ongoing structural change in politics, society and the media system" (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos. 1996, et.al. in Plasser and Plasser. 2002: 16) (modernization); the transnational diffusion of these practices and their local adoption and adaptation is also important. Furthermore, Americanization is not a completely overwhelmingly trend that ends with the standardization of campaigns; although in Mexico we can see an important expansion of American-style campaigning this does not mean that these practices have totally replaced others. In fact Americanization supplements country-specific situations (hybridization); canvassing, rallies and door-to-door campaigns are evidence of this. It is clear that Mexico's internal context was a fertile ground for the adoption of these practices, but it is also evident that this ground had its own particularities that now coexist with US style practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Especially TV (Arganoff. 1976)

<sup>3</sup> Industrialization via Substitution of Imports.

<sup>4</sup> In Mexico, the broadcast media" acquired their own political power and autonomy from the state" (Fox. 1998; 21).