

Political Personalization And Polyarchic Systems: The Opening To Representativeness?¹

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Abstract

This paper represents an analytical resource of the phenomenon of political personalization in electoral campaigns, from the accommodation of political forces in polyarchic systems. In this way, it is based on Robert Dahl's proposal by considering that democratic government systems are, rather, polyarchies and that a multitude of interests, starting points and political forces converge in them that have led to a kind of re-understanding of the relationship of candidates and political parties in order to continue to be valid in the political arena and win the citizen vote. The central thesis of the paper is that political personalization should not only be understood as the maximization of the personal attributes of those who aspire to win electoral contests, but also as a result of the loss of partisan identities in an increasingly plural and diverse sociopolitical context. Therefore, the main objective of the document is to establish an analytical route that favors the understanding of political personalization as a result of a complex network of political circumstances that have promoted electoral campaigns that tend to maximize personal qualities and attributes within the framework of polyarchic systems.

Keywords: representativeness, political parties, plurality, electoral campaigns, candidates

INTRODUCTION

The common approach to political personalization is oriented towards the emphasis on the importance of maximizing the personal image (Orejuela, 2009) of candidates in their campaigns. Thus, it is usually a topic limited to the field of political communication and political marketing. However, this vision could be insufficient to investigate alternative views in which the focus of attention is democracy, and its mechanisms of public debate and representative capacities. The question that must be asked is, why explore this analytical route?

The basic idea behind this essay is to understand that political personalization in electoral campaigns not only represents the tendency for there to be a greater exposure of the personal attributes and political capacities (albeit in the background) of the candidates, but that this phenomenon is rather a matter of readjustment of the party system in Mexico, in the context of the debate on how "democracy" should be understood and which are the elements that can currently play a relevant role in it.

In the following, we will prefer to use the word polyarchy instead of democracy, assuming that ideally it is impossible to find fully democratic political systems, and that instead it is possible to identify spaces in which to find mechanisms through which representativeness can be developed. Therefore, the central thesis that we wish to support is that political personalization is a phenomenon originated by the opening to political participation and, consequently, the range of needs, groups and individuals that political parties have to attend through the design of strategies, mechanisms and procedures that allow them to consolidate their leaders as ideological "banners" for diverse social sectors has widened.

Within the framework of the plurality and heterogeneity of political actors, two complications are evident that party structures have had to resolve. Firstly, there are fewer identities with political parties (Moreno, 2009) and secondly, there is electoral volatility (Díaz and Vivero, 2015), which has led to electoral campaigns increasingly finding success in the manifestation of the personal virtues of their candidates. For this reason, the main objective of this paper is to analyze how representativeness and public debate can serve as a basis for problematizing the phenomenon of political personalization in a broader context, where the recognition of the diversity of voters, their needs and beliefs is essential for the design of "successful" electoral campaigns.

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The sections that make up the paper are the following: 1) Political personalization: when the focus is on the candidates. It briefly analyzes some of its characteristics in the light of polyarchic political systems, based on normative approaches linked to the recognition of plurality, 2) Then... why polyarchy? This section analyzes in greater detail and in detail Robert Dahl's main approaches to polyarchy, the recognition of plurality in this system of government and how, from my point of view, this has caused a rearrangement in the party system in Mexico, leading to electoral campaigns tending to the personalization of candidates. This section has the conviction of outlining complementary interpretations to those already existing in the field of communication and marketing, and 3) Final reflections, whose purpose is to delimit the scope and limitations of the approaches addressed and to establish proposals that, as preliminary ideas, serve as a starting point for further reflections.

1. Political personalization: When the candidates are the center of attention.

For some specialists in electoral matters Moreno (2009) and Aruguete (2017) political personalization can be understood as one of the many consequences derived from the loss of partisan identities, without this. In this sense, according to the study conducted by Latinobarómetro (2018) trust in political parties has been on a downward trend since 2013 when it reached, at a regional level, 24%. By 2018, it had decreased six percentage points to 18%. Particularly in Mexico, trust in political parties was in that year at 22%, a number slightly higher than the average found in the area.

Therefore, it should be assumed that political personalization refers to the greater emphasis that the media and political parties place on the behavior and personal characteristics of candidates in their person, their characteristics and individualities (Orejuela, 2009), in such a way that they represent a kind of cognitive shortcut for citizens to cast their vote, guided by the qualities, experience and personality traits that they can demonstrate. Caution should be taken not to commit some reductionism in its approach and to appeal to an optic that allows understanding its importance in the context of polyarchic systems.

So, is it important to speak of polyarchy? When the social world is increasingly diverse, heterogeneous and plural, it requires open political systems capable of including demands, points of view and needs of all the actors who participate in cultural activities and political debate, who have a voice and who find in the exchange of perspectives the ideal way to get involved in issues of general interest. Thus, polyarchic systems promote the rise of candidates who give the voter the feeling of being closer and with more similar social characteristics. It is therefore a matter of creating the ideal political scenario so that there is not only greater competitiveness (Dahl, 2009) but also greater representativeness, also allowing for the recognition of plurality and the play of political parties in democratic (or polyarchic) life.

Thus, one of the most important current challenges that political parties must face is to take advantage of and optimize the resources they have at their disposal in order to remain in force and continue to be a key element in the development of democratic life. Thus, Diaz and Góngora (2019) point out that media exposure, the result of the postmodern stage of the development of electoral campaigns, tends to mobilize people politically because it increases their interests and knowledge, and consequently favors civic participation. This reading tends to be based on the understanding that the use of direct communication media such as television, social networks, e-mail, allow reaching different segments of voters, whose socio-demographic characteristics are heterogeneous.

In short, political personalization in electoral campaigns can be understood through the following approaches according to Orejuela (2009):

- To be an expert in humanity; that is, to have the capacity to attend and understand others, due to their solidarity and empathy towards the circumstances of others and the problems that afflict them.
- Have the knowledge to be able to respond and offer viable proposals in the technical and methodical sense. At the same time, he/she must behave as a statesman, capable of transmitting confidence to his/her electors.
- To achieve a rich personality; that is, to possess individual attributes that distinguish the politician from other contenders. Thus, qualities such as enthusiasm, emotionality, open-mindedness, motivation, initiative and divergent thinking are just some of the possibilities that have great acceptance among the electorate.
- Communicative capacity: It is impossible not to communicate, therefore, the politician must have the ability to listen, speak, disseminate, decide, project, criticize and convince. Thus, every act performed by the politician is communication.

Therefore, in the background of the approach of the political personalization in electoral campaigns, there are the ideas of a free participation of the electorate and of those who aspire to be their political representatives, and in these "freedoms" there is also the demand of knowing themselves in a wide framework of political participation, This vision does not only imply "strategic campaign" changes, since its true root is to assume that a polyarchy is a political system that must attend to plurality. In this sense, Dahl (2009) points out that:

Parties also vary in their structure and organization. As has been said many times, the need to mobilize a larger electorate left the way open for the development of modern party organizations; for, as the electorate grew, informal arrangements, which worked with a small group of voters, became inadequate (32 pp.).

Specifically, the personalization of electoral campaigns should be seen as a consequence of the new adjustments that political parties have had to deploy as instances that are part of the democratic game, in which the composition of the social structure invites to think of institutions open to the recognition of diversity, therefore candidates represent, in the purest sense, the ideal way to reach the voter they wish to persuade.

However, it seems to me that the call for open systems does not completely eradicate some complications about public debate and representativeness (Dahl, 2009). For example, who are the participants, do political parties, candidates and candidates fully represent the interests, needs and perspectives of those social sectors they address? Although, ideally,

any democracy would like to fully comply with both principles (public debate and representativeness), the reality of things is that openness to plurality will always imply certain challenges that may even seem insurmountable, and perhaps the personalization of electoral campaigns allows for open, "inclusive" but not total participation of all the agents involved and the values and interests they represent.

As it had been pointed out, the approach to the political personalization of electoral campaigns has a strong anchorage in the studies on political communication, however, under a broader view it should be assumed that its origin (and therefore its study) should be placed in the great contemporary debates on democratic (or polyarchic) life as a consequence of the normative and institutional ruptures of the hegemonic-closed governments, in favor of systems that tend to openness and the recognition of plurality, and therefore, then, to question whether political personalization can be seen as a consequence of the rearrangement of political parties in order to maintain such systems. With its challenges and complications, no one would argue that a return to intolerance is a better way to encourage participation and representation.

2. So...how should we understand political personalization in the framework of polyarchy?

As previously stated, the central thesis of the essay is that political personalization in electoral campaigns can be understood as a consequence of the opening of systems tending towards polyarchy, whose main normative characteristic is the recognition of plurality. In the same vein, it is worth remembering that such opening brings with it the broadening of the range of interests, needs and social groups that are part of the game of participation and representativeness. This, in turn, has led to notorious changes in the relationship between political parties and their candidates: do people vote more for what the candidates "transmit" than for the political party? A question that exposes the simplicity with which the issue in question can be understood, and whose answer can give certain clues about the pragmatism and utilitarianism on which electoral campaigns are based.

It is interesting to understand that open participation and political competition combined, originates a change in the political composition of its leaders (Dahl, 2009), especially in those who obtain their positions through elections. As new groups gain access to the vote, new interests, needs and positions are implicitly incorporated, and those politicians who have the greatest affinity with them will be the ones who win. With this argument I hope to have given way to the following approach.

Political personalization is not an exclusive subject of the area of political communication, under a normative perspective it could be assumed that it is an "empirical" consequence of the recognition and incorporation of the plurality and heterogeneity of interests, a consequence of the opening and transformation of hegemonic political systems to others of relative democratization or polyarchic systems. In the following, I will present some ideas that I hope will allow me to broaden and deepen this idea.

Political parties are in a particularly negative moment, similar to the years preceding the Asian crisis at the end of the millennium. Disenchantment with politics has led to party fragmentation, a crisis of representation and the election of populist leaders (Latinobarómetro, 2018). These data account for the crisis in which the region's political systems find themselves where no one is a winner.

From the perspective of partisan change, the lack of trust observed in political parties can be understood if attention is paid to the social and political trajectories that in Mexico have been traced, since political leaders also adjust to social changes in the country and according to Cordero and Funk (2011) the logics of recruitment of political elites of the same political parties are regularly understood within the framework of sociocultural diversity. In essence, the adjustments, transitions, adaptations and modifications that political parties have undergone in the last two decades regarding the conduct of electoral campaigns are due to the fact that their heterogeneous elites have had to adapt or, failing that, transform themselves as a mechanism for political parties to hold power more frequently and with greater emphasis on the candidates who participate in their electoral campaigns. Thus, the disenchantment in political parties and the distrust generated in the citizenry by the poor results in substantial problems (Esteinou, 2019) has generated that the population places greater trust in individuals (politicians) who are closer to their expectations, and more familiar in their way of being, contributing to the increase of governments based on charismatic leaders.

When it is time for election campaigns, we have all witnessed (or participated in) the mobilization of human, economic and financial resources by political parties, their agenda is oriented to capture the most votes, while the candidate has the firm task of pleasing, connecting and convincing the electorate that "he/she represents the best option". However, this first approximation may be rather simplified than what I would like to explain. Perhaps the first question is, best choice with respect to what?

The answer to the above question may involve some considerations that I would like to highlight:

- The greater the opportunities for expressing, organizing and representing political preferences, the greater the number and variety of political preferences and interests likely to be present in political life (Dahl, 2009).
- The candidate will be "the best option" as long as he or she is able to represent the political preferences of the people, and if they also represent the bulk of the population, the election results will be favorable.
- From the above, we can corroborate the idea that the greater the orientation towards an open political system, the greater the possibility of incorporating more diversity of interests in political life, which normatively implies a recognition of plurality, and what it represents empirically is a rearrangement in the party system, which has meant, among many issues, greater exposure of the personal figure of candidates, whose purpose is to highlight their affinity with the electorate. A more colloquial language (Barbero, 1991) and a closer and more approachable personality can contribute significantly to their permanence in the social imaginary.

Until now a de facto argument has been assumed, and it seems to me that it is time to question its viability: The Mexican political system is a polyarchy and not a closed hegemony or a competitive oligarchy, and therefore admits the right of

inclusion to the heterogeneity of interests, what are the approaches that make me support my assertion? Although it may seem obvious to consider valid the approach with which I began this paragraph, it may not be so in light of the low civic participation and citizen commitment that are reflected, most of the time, in the low percentage of attendance to the elections, acts of corruption that cast doubt on the objectivity, transparency and reliability of political parties, candidates and the organizations in charge of monitoring the proper performance of the electoral processes. However, these are not sufficient reasons to doubt universal suffrage and the right to citizen participation in political issues (Dahl, 2009). What is questionable is the operational leadership of those entrusted with the task of making the political system function as embodied in its institutions and organizations.

In a climate in which the party in power and the opposition have little or no power to exercise violence because of their ideological discrepancies, competitive politics (Dahl, 2009) seems to be the most appropriate means for such discordance to develop. This condition is very important, as it removes all thought and action designed for the suppression of opposition, and instead leaves the way open for the ballot box, debate, inclusion and representativeness. While it is true, with many vicissitudes, challenges and complications, it is difficult to question the existence of the normative basis of a polyarchic system in Mexico.

So, then, why understand the phenomenon of political personalization in electoral campaigns from the perspective of polyarchy? Because only this system of political organization makes possible the opening to competitiveness, to participation in the political debate and, above all, because it promotes representativeness. It is the candidates who have the enormous challenge of representing the interests of the people. Today, at least in political discourse and in the creation of work agendas, the normative principles of inclusion, respect and tolerance can be found. In election campaigns, the echo of these is reflected in promises to different sectors of the population.

In Dahl's words, a pluralistic social order and a competitive economy are preconditions that promote a competitive political system, and in it representativeness, it seems to me, is a *sine qua non* condition for political personalization. We are facing the scenario of contemporary organizational systems where, in addition, the loss of partisan identities and the massive use of the mass media have resulted, among other things, in political leaders being increasingly responsible for persuading the voter.

3. Final reflections

To look at the phenomenon of political personalization in electoral campaigns from a position that invites the analysis of polyarchic systems is to understand that in every object of study of political and social life there are present relations of aspects, mechanisms and procedures that will be approached or not, according to the limits that one wants to comply with. In line with these ideas, the reflections developed in this brief essay are oriented to the recognition of the normative principles that characterize polyarchies, as open systems that promote participation, public debate and representativeness. In what other scenario can political personalization develop besides the one offered by polyarchy? At the moment, I cannot find another political arena that allows such openness, and in which the candidates, their qualities, capacities and physical attributes, have so much influence in the final decision of the electorate. Nor do I intend to "jump" into the boat of optimism without looking at all the great challenges that this type of political system offers.

Some readings (perhaps not very hopeful) warn that political personalization is a faithful reflection of the commercialization of electoral processes (Orejuela, 2009) in which the candidate becomes the product that is decided to buy, however, I consider these perspectives limited in their explanatory capacity (if they pretend to be) because they leave in oblivion the ways in which, in more than one sense, more levels of approach can be anchored. Thus, political personalization is not only the mere act of enhancing the personal image of candidates.

So, going back to the great challenges of polyarchies, we can see that one of the greatest complications and complexities is that of representativeness in the face of an increasingly diverse and plural social panorama, and it is precisely in this social scenario that the Mexican party system had to change and adjust to an increasingly accelerated dynamic due to the "massification" of the media and the use of the Internet as a source of information (Martínez-García and Carrillo-Hinojosa, 2022). But also because of the demands of social sectors that were clamoring to be taken into account and to be recognized in the social and political space. Thus, "the old clientelistic agreements" between political parties and citizens ceased to be the mechanisms par excellence of Mexican politics. Instead, new alternatives had to be consolidated, then, the candidates would progressively (though not subtly) become the center of the electoral campaigns. Although these practices are not new, they would occupy a special place in the academic debate. These changes should not be seen only at the operational level, but rather as the result of the consolidation of a political system whose normative values have gradually echoed the recognition of the heterogeneity and diversity of the actors involved.

Robert Dahl's perspective offers a normative-empirical model that allows us to unveil before our eyes, the principles and characteristics by which it is feasible to think that polyarchy is the best form of government in order to recognize and include plurality, however, it also shows its "small" but deep cracks by inviting us to question the capacity of political parties (and their candidates) to represent the wide range of positions, needs and interests of social groups, who do they represent? These are just some of the questions that the work of this political scientist prompts us to ask ourselves.

Dahl (2009), in exposing the dimensions of the functioning of polyarchic systems, also offers ways out of the labyrinths that we can face in his work. Thus, political participation becomes a cornerstone to promote the inclusion of plurality and access to information is vital to exercise this right responsibly. In this way, the citizen must play an active role in order to promote the mechanisms by which attention is paid to his or her positions. However, access to information is no guarantee of promoting a critical citizenship committed to the principle of participation. Promoting a civic culture, it seems to me, is one of the greatest challenges of the systems of political representation, so that then yes, the personalization in electoral

campaigns is given by virtue of the interests that the candidates raise as a basis of the principle of representativeness. These are therefore mechanisms of sophistication in which the social base is crucial.

Thinking about the implications of political personalization in the normative-empirical framework offered by Dahl, allows me to stop and reflect on what I have learned in the courses of Political Theory I and II, thus forming an integrated, structured and systematized field of knowledge, and I find interesting the historical journey that was developed on the main currents of political thought, the debates they proposed and the veins of analysis they raised. In other words, the Political Theory course might seem to be a compendium of dates and characters, but no! its value and richness was always concentrated in the possibility of moving with relative freedom on the ontological, epistemological, methodological and theoretical levels. To say so might seem an odious simplification, however, the implications are profound and complex. For example, are the candidates, at present, the ones who occupy a more prominent role in electoral contests, how has political personalization led to the rearrangement of party structures, or, has the loss of party identities led political parties to cede more prominence to politicians? Of course, these questions constitute an extraordinary possibility to continue contributing to the topic in question and to propitiate a dialogic process of knowledge.

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