

Contrast Electoral Campaigns: Its Strategic Implementation in an Economic Crisis Context

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Abstract

The essay makes a conceptual and historical review, in light of the leading theorists of democracy on election campaigns base on contrast, prevalent in most democratic systems in the world. It makes a methodological approach on the strategic linkage of such campaigns in contexts of economic crisis. It analyzes the paradigmatic cases of sustained presidential contrast campaigns in the United States in 2008 and Panama in 2009. We conclude that contrast campaigns are proper stamps in democratic systems in the world, which are articulated in order to gain a competitive advantage for their drivers in contention for the public representative spaces.

Key Words: Political campaigns, contrast, democracy, strategic organization, economic crisis, Mexico, United States of America, Barack Obama and Panama.

1. Introduction

Political campaigns of contrast have as main purpose the “advantage comparison” between different options presented to voters, giving powerful “reasons” to people as for why one party or candidate is better than the other, publicising aspects as to why they are superior whether in their experience, proposals, results or achievements, and above all, they are clear about advantages or benefits they represent to society when being voted to take a public representation position. The main idea of a contrast campaign is to achieve a clear difference between all alternatives in competition by presenting themselves to voters as the best option among all existing options at the public-electoral offer. In a way, any election campaign is a campaign of contrast, in which two or more parties compare their candidates, proposals and strategies in order to woo and win the support of the voter to occupy a space of popular representation.

In fact, the history of election campaigns, under systems of democratic imprint, is the story of the confrontation between two or more policy options, where voters decide, freely, between two or more electoral choices they face. Such was the case with the first campaign in the United States conducted in 1792, when George Washington re-elected himself as president¹, being nominated as candidate by the Federal Party. On the other hand Washington's opposite candidate in the race for the presidential re-election was George Clinton, supported by the Democratic-Republican Party².

In this historic election, both the Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican contrasted not only to his candidates and their proposals, but even confronted the different projects of nation that each of the parties represented. Thus, “members of the Federalist Party contemptuously called Democrats” the party members of Jefferson, with the intention of identifying the most radical supporters of the French Revolution at that time “spread terror” in France, looking for and frighten American voters with the prospect that the country would undergo a chaos similar to that of France³”. However “members of Jefferson's party responded, calling themselves “Republicans” in order to be identify with patriots who had fought against the English Monarchy for the US independence; the name had also a double sense, to be identified as the opposition to a regime lead by a leader with the air of a King (referring to Washington)”⁴

¹ In 1789, Washington was elected by the American Congress as the first president of the United States of America; therefore there really wasn't an electoral campaign until his re-election.

² In these elections John Adams was also elected as vice-president, he ran against Thomas Jefferson, as candidate for vice-president by the Democrat-Republican Party.

³ See United States' Democrat-Republican Party in http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partido_Dem%C3%B3crata-Republicano_de_los_Estados_Unidos.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

In the case of Mexico, the first campaign was organized in 1828 the Mexican government recently established a product of the consummation of independence from Spain. This was an election in which voters participated as state legislatures and their members, as it was not an election with the popular vote. The candidates were Vicente Guerrero, Manuel Gómez Pedraza and Anastasio Bustamante. The first orientation progressive liberal candidate was the promoter of republican ideas and federalist supporter of York Rite. The second one was a candidate of the conservative sector, more sympathetic to centralist ideas and to local governments' ideas. The third one, a moderate liberal candidate, also sympathised with York Party's ideas. At the end, Gómez Pedraza was the winner of the election. Nonetheless, Vicente Guerrero, second in voting, challenged the result, arguing the execution of fraudulent actions in the election and calling Gómez Pedraza "illegitimate president". At the end, National Congress annulled the elections, naming afterwards Vicente Guerrero as president of the republic on April 1929, and Anastasio Bustamante as vice-president.

This was a contrast first campaign, in which the various candidates differentiate their proposals for government and country and are distinguished by their history, experience and contribution to the independence of Mexico. Gomez Pedraza, bet on the partnership with local authorities, disqualifying Guerrero during the war because, he said, a character "radical and idealistic. Meanwhile, Vicente Guerrero Gomez Pedraza described as representing the interests of the Spanish crown and conservative sectors of the country. This campaign took place in a context of crisis and economic hardship, resulting in the independence movement and boycott to the new country by the "interests" of the Spanish metropolis. Nowadays, nearly two centuries of the first election, election campaigns have been institutionalized as a routine exercise of democratic systems, where parties contrast not only to his candidates and discuss their proposals but also compete on his record, his experience , skills and professional credentials to perform in government.

2. Democracy as contrast

Electoral democracy involves not just the existence of political plurality, but also the existence of competition, where two or more parties, political organizations or candidates contrast their different political offers, contrast their postures, compare results and compare proposals to voters, in order to get the majority's vote and therefore the popular election position (Esteves, 1987).

In this matter, many democratic theorists have conceptualized as a system of preferences and competition for the votes of citizens in order to succeed in building electoral majorities and thus give the government a social legitimacy. For example, according to Sartori (1987), democracy is legitimized by free elections and recurrent, by a majority of voters. For his part, Joseph Schumpeter (1947), notes that the democratic method is that institutional mechanism designed to reach policy decisions, where individuals acquire the power to decide through a competitive struggle for the vote of the people. "In turn, Huntington (1989) notes that democracy is majority rule, formed from the persuasion and mobilization of support from voters in free and periodic elections. Finally, Dahl (1989) suggests that democracy is a system of competition and participation, based on obtaining the preferences of citizens.

This means, every democratic system involves, among other things, voters' participation, in a periodic way, in a free and competed elections in order to choose their leaders. In These elections, different parties, institutions, organizations or candidates gave a public offer to voters, trying to get a majority vote and so to get a representative public position. This political offer which includes candidates themselves and their parties' history, generally contrasts and compares (through different means and using different strategies) with the one offered by their competitors. These days, the vast majority of democracies in the world or in America, Europe, Asia or Oceania, are driven campaigns often contrast between different parties representing different political and ideological options.

3. Contrast Model.

The methodological plan used in a contrast campaign is neither unique nor uniform as the case may be in each election since several variants can be found when making it. Nonetheless, a regular pattern or methodological plan may be identified when making a contrast campaign.

The following describes the outline of a campaign of contrast.

First, analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of their own and those of major rivals, including the results of government, the record of candidates and parties and their relations, positioning and affections.

Second; A contrast in time between main conditions in the past, present and what is seek in the future is also carried out. This means, as a part of the contrast exercise, it is analysed how the country was (economy, security, government services, etc.) and how people were in the past and nowadays how are they (crisis, insecurity, unemployment, etc.) or too nowadays, how the country (crisis, debt, bureaucracy and insecurity) and people are (unemployment and poverty) and how they should be in the future (progress, prosperity, life quality, security and development).

Third; self strengths are confronted with the main opponent's weaknesses though different media either in a personal, institutional or global level as State or country.

Fourth; the past (crisis) is contrasted and debated with the present or the present (crisis) with the future. It is appealed to people's conscience, believes and values, as well as to voters' hopes of a better "tomorrow".

Fifth; continuity is contrasted against change, certainty against uncertainty, crisis against "paradise" and past against future. If the party is ruling, they need to follow the same path to ensure and increase benefits, achievements and privileges that the party represents and are exposed to voters. If it's the opposition's party, the need to change things once and for all is presents, since the current situation is unbearable and terrible; it mobilizes people's discontent against government and its party.

Sixth; it is always presented a dilemma to voters: to follow with "more of the same" or to vote for the change people want and the country needs, presenting themselves as the generation of change.

Seventh; the strategy is evaluated. If necessary, adjustments are made.

Eighth; there is a feedback on the contrast strategy. It shall be remember that campaigns are related to maximize or minimize. Maximize self good choices as well as to minimize self mistakes and opponents' good choices.

4. Campaigns in a crisis context.

Economic crises generate devastating effects not only the economies of nations, but also the mood of the people who are affected or threatened, directly or indirectly by this phenomenon recessive.

These states of mind might be used by parties and their candidates to mobilize voters and hence, winning the election. In fact there are a lot of examples of these successful political campaigns carried out under economic crisis contexts, where the main strategy was made based on mobilizing social dissatisfaction produced by economic crisis. Such were the cases of the presidential campaign in USA in 2008 and in Panama in 2009. In order to show some examples, these campaigns are analysed below.

Economic crises generate, among other things, declining jobs, business closures, rising prices, loss of purchasing power, higher levels of insecurity and crime, and in general, a lower level of welfare and income for families.

This situation produces a series of feelings and emotions among population, whether discomfort, anger, rage, fear, sadness or uncertainty, rising distrust toward the ruling government. Popular dissatisfaction increases by an inadequate crisis' management and by the worsening it.

Under this scenario, opposing parties, by one hand use this situation of anguish and social uncertainty in order to get a political benefit systematically questioning government's incapacity whether by promoting a better well-being for the population, being victorious in contests or even, by being responsible for the crisis. By the other hand, these parties present themselves before voters as an alternative for change and hope, using a series of media and marketing strategies in order to achieve their purpose.

In addition to the scathing criticism over the crisis, generally, add the questioning of the opposition parties about mistakes, inadequacies, scandals and abuses of rulers, mobilizing social discontent with the government and challenging the most vulnerable of the candidates nominated by the ruling party.

In this way, under a crisis scenario, contrast becomes the trick and strategy mainly used by several parties and their candidates who fight to take a public position. Certainly, crisis does not automatically produce votes for the opposition; neither has it helped to win nor to lose elections. Nonetheless, an accurate and timely management of crisis or contrast strategies and polarization allow gain or lose power on democratic political systems.

5. Case study of contrast campaigns

In order to exemplify the plan's use, two examples of successful campaigns run in late years are presented. In these campaigns, contrast and polarization were the main axis of strategies that drove candidates and parties to win. On the one hand, it describes the case of the United States of America (USA) in 2008 and, on the other, the presidential election in Panama in 2009, both developed in a context of economic crisis.

5.1 Presidential election in the USA.

On November 4, 2008, United States of America carried out their presidential elections in the middle of a severe economic crisis, a mortgage crisis without any precedent in the country's modern history a substantial rise of food and fuel prices, and in the middle of an unpopular war against "terrorism" fought in Afghanistan and Iraq.

According to electoral results, the Democrat Party got 53 percent of popular vote equals 65.4 million votes, as well as 364 votes in the Electoral College. By the other hand the Republican Party only got 46 percent of popular vote which equals 57.4 million votes and 163 delegates in the Electoral College. Furthermore, democrats won 6 additional positions in the Senate and 20 in the House of Representative.

The main strategy in democrats' campaign was focused in presenting republicans and their candidates as the option which represented continuity of economical policies and mistaken and disastrous military policies in the administration of George W. Bush. Mistakes and inadequacies of republican government nurtured, too, the strategy of Democrats (Valdez, 2008). His central campaign message was simple, but profound, centered on the idea of change. During the primary campaign, for example, Obama used the slogan change we can believe in! and that during the constitutional struggle, it became "the change we need."

In this way, his argumentative line was regularly focused on stating that if the people wanted to maintain economic policies, philosophy and disasters generated during the Bush administration, and then they had to vote for John McCain and the continuation he represented. I.E. Obama knew how to present a dilemma to voters, if they wanted "more of the same," then they would have to vote for republicans. Nevertheless, if they really wanted a changed, a transformation in politics, in economy, and in well-being and in the nation's future, then, they should vote for democrats.

In this presidential election, besides, Democrats were highly competent and shrewd three emotions to mobilize voters and win contests widely. First, mobilizing existing fear or fear among Americans considering his argument, first, that ambiguous policies and philosophies that drove the Republican administration of George W. Bush, again lead to disaster and economic collapse. And for another, moved the fear of those voters who did not want to see family or friends, or themselves, recruited to fight in an endless war in the Middle East, launched on false premises.

Second, they moved anger, frustration and rage of million of voters (gathered around in the last eight years of the republican government) who were whether affected by the current economic, mortgage and financial crisis affecting US, or by price rising of fuel and food and/or by the increasing unemployment or fiscal deficit.

Third, democrats were able to mobilize the desire or the hope of the people that things can change for the better, if they chose to take, through their vote, republicans in the white house to form a new administration and a government more sensitive to people's problems, with economic policies more humane and a more friendly attitude toward the world.

In short, Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 was a typical example illustrating the contrast campaign model, in which the dilemma of continuity was confronted and presented to voters against change as main argument, line and strategy which allowed democrats to win the elections.

5.2 Presidential elections in Panama.

On May 3, 2009, general elections were held in Panama, to elect a President and Vice President. Moreover, this query is chosen 1.588 elected office, including highlighting the 20 members of the Central American Parliament, 71 deputies to the National Assembly, 75 mayors and 623 representatives of township, and 6 council members, all with their respective substitutes.

According to official results, the candidate of the Alliance for the Change⁵ (Alianza por el Cambio) Ricardo Martinelli⁶ got 60.11 percent of votes, followed by Balbina Herrera candidate by the “coalition “One country for all” (Un País para Todos”, who got 36.79 percent of votes.⁷ By the other hand Guillermo Endara nominated by the “Vanguardia Moral de la Patria” party got 2.35 percent of votes.

These elections were carried out in an economic global crisis context, which has severely affected Latin-American nations. In this particular matter, economic crisis severely stroked Panama, creating a wave of unemployment, insecurity and uncertainty among thousand of Panamanians. As a result of this crisis, Panamanian government was forced to change the economic growth casting from 9.5 to 5.5 during 2009.⁸ By the other hand, the unemployment rate is estimated in 6.3 percent, one of the highest of Central-America.

Martinelli’s strategy was focused on undermining Balbina Herrera’s image, criticising PRD (main alliance’s party) and above all, maximising the mistakes and inadequacies of Martin Torrijó’s Government.

Balbina was accused by her detractors of being a radical left-wing woman that kept historical links with Omar Torrijó’s and Manuel Antonio Noriega’s government, she would re-install the dictatorial system in Panama, and endanger nations’ progress and development. Besides, Herrera was associated with inefficiency (la Chola), abuse (street closure because I rule here) and governmental corruption (they get in without a penny and they get out as rich people).

Martinelli’s strategy was also focused on questioning things that didn’t work and moving people’s dissatisfaction with government (high bureaucracy, public insecurity and bad public services), presenting Martinelli himself as the candidate of change and hope (employment, economic growth, public works, and good government, drug trafficking combat, subway, English for life, etc.) as a successful and eccentric businessman (We, creasy, are more), with a simple and popular language someone who knew people’s problems (Walking in people’s shoes), and above all, someone who had the experience to lead Panama to a safe port. He accused the official candidate of representing the continuity (more of the same) and he presented himself as representative of the generation of change.

At the end, Martinelli won, beating his main opponent with more than 23 percent, becoming Panama’s 53 president.

This presidential campaign in Central America, articulated based on the contrast (and polarization) between an opposition party versus party in power, shows, on one hand, the common and often this type of campaign is under (the political system democratic imprinting) and, on the other, it shows how functional and useful are such campaigns, from the perspective of electoral viability.

6. Final comments.

Democracy is a competition, debate and contrast system of different public offers present in the electoral system. Campaigns are daily exercises of democracy, in which parties and their candidates give different reasons to voters as to why voting for one option or why not voting for the opponent.

Contrasting means comparing, differing, dissenting, disagreeing or differentiating. A modern democracy involves disagreeing, comparison, debate and differentiation. As a result, any campaign in a democratic stamp system involves debate, confrontation of ideas and alternative projects of government where voters can choose between two or more options to choose their representatives.

As a part of this contrast, during a campaign, different political options existing in the electoral system, will try to persuade voters in order to get their votes based in their assets and strengths, trying to minimize and insult their competitors. Id est., contrast is made by one hand, by stressing self positive aspects and by the other hand, by maximizing adversaries’ negative aspects.

⁵ The Alliance for change was made up by the National Republican Liberal Movement, the Panameñista Party, Democratic Change and Patriotic Union.

⁶ Martinelli is a rich, practical and rough supermarket businessman, who was associated by voters with the value of a successful, working and tenacious emigrant.

⁷ This coalition was made by the Democratic Revolutionary Party, Popular Party and Liberal Party.

⁸ In 2007 economic growth in this Central-American nation was 11.5 percent.

In an economic crisis contest, contrast campaigns get special relevance, since different parties and candidates, mainly opposition candidates, will try to make an strategy looking forward to obtain different political and electoral benefits.

History of electoral campaigns and history of democratic systems itself, show that contrast, debate, comparison and competition have been a distinctive element of this kind of proselytising exercises, mainly in times of crisis. The Presidential election cases in USA in 2008 and in Panama in 2009 are paradigmatic examples which nowadays show that the most used campaign model in modern democracies of the world is still the contrast campaign model. Contrasting to win seems to be the main purpose and slogan of campaign supporters worldwide.

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