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An image is worth a thousand policies: the discursive strategy of electoral campaigns of winning candidates in Latin America

Abstract

This paper examines the most important features of three recent presidential campaigns in Latin America, aiming at knowing the dominant trend in their major pieces of advertising. A comparison is made among the spots of candidates who won the presidential elections held in 2011 in Argentina (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), 2012 in Mexico (Enrique Peña Nieto) and 2012 in Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), based on the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, 2003). Through a content analysis of 30 spots –and within them, 139 recording units– the article explores: 1) the type of discursive strategy prevalent in the spots of these winning campaigns, 2) whether topics related to policy aspects prevail or not over those referring to the candidates' image, and 3) if, in temporal terms, these messages indicate issues from the past or future goals. Two relevant considerations arise from the study. On the one hand, the topic "policy" coexists with the topic "character"; on the other hand, "acclaiming" is more intensely associated with "events of the recent past", while "attacking" is completely linked to "past events" which belong to previous administrations of those presidents who run for another term in office.

Keywords

Functional theory of political campaign discourse, general elections, Latin America, retrospective vote, winning political campaigns, campaign spots

1. Introduction

Individuals obtain information from the media to make their voting decisions, whether they are messages conveyed by candidates themselves or by the news, as they face the impossible feat of directly accessing presidential candidates to become familiar with the issues they stand for. However, voters learn more from ads than they do from the news (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen & Wen, 2002). Through political advertising, a candidate or party has the

“opportunity” to expose audiences to messages through mass media communications with the purpose of influencing in their political behavior (Kaid, 1981). In this way, they hold a strong control over the messages that reach the public, since they rely on an unmediated type of discourse, by providing the greatest amount of information that voters could possibly acquire on their issue positions and image (Benoit, 1999, 2003; Kern, 1989), and consequently generate significant effects on memory, political attitudes and intention to vote. Storytelling through images (Freidenberg, 1997) stimulates voters to base their electoral decision-making on feelings rather than arguments (García Beaudoux & D’Adamo, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the winning presidential campaigns of Argentina in 2011, Venezuela in 2012 and Mexico in 2012, to systematically describe the dominant characteristics of the verbal elements in key advertising pieces: political spots. Ten spots were taken from the official Youtube accounts of winning candidates Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Enrique Peña Nieto and Hugo Chávez, and were analyzed. These spots were divided into 139 recording units according to separate themes within these advertising pieces, as detailed in the method section.

Functional theory of political campaign discourse is the conceptual basis for this study. The ultimate objective is to determine whether the characteristics attributed to winning candidates of an electoral race by the functional theory of discourse prevail in these three campaigns; specifically, whether the messages have been principally geared towards the past or the future in what respects the time variable, and whether topics have prevailed about the image of candidates in terms of a communications offering perspective. The specific objectives seek to investigate: 1) what type of discursive strategy prevails in the verbal dimension of the spots analyzed¹; 2) whether topics referring to policy issues outnumber those that refer to the character of candidates; 3) if, in terms of time, said policy issues point to past events or future goals. It must be emphasized that the analysis is based on the discourse offerings and that the effects that such campaigns have over election outcomes are not contemplated.

2. Literature

Campaign discourse messages contain implicit recommendations that are intentionally directed at voters for persuading them to vote a particular political option. In doing so, having full command of said messages is an inevitable advantage, compared with other types of discourse such as debates and media coverage of campaigns. Especially considering that the growing interweaving of candidate’s messages and news reporting have evolved into a type of coverage dominated by information pertaining to expenses incurred, which candidate leads the polls or responds and/or defends him- or her-self from opponent accusations. In the seventies, Patterson used the discursive construction of a “horse race” to describe this phenomenon. In this author’s words, there is a preeminence of “strategic games” to the detriment of questions of national policy and leadership (Patterson, 1980: 21). Thus, the time allotted to TV ads is greater than that for news coverage of campaigns (Patterson & McClure, 1976).

The television spot has a long tradition in election campaigns. García Beaudoux and D’Adamo (2013) synthesize its four constituent elements: its manifest intentionality, its persuasive purpose, its transmitter is a candidate, leader or party and it is televised. It is an intense type of discourse, which combines words, images and sounds (Westen, 2007, cited in García Beaudoux & D’Adamo, 2012). From the 1950s to present, a number of functions of

¹ This analysis includes the verbal dimensions of spots and therefore the codebook does not apply to sounds and images.

spots have been systematically defined: to create interest in candidates and make them known, to define or redefine their image and to generate or reinforce support in them by framing public debate topics.

The Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania proposes two types of ads that can converge in a single electoral campaign. “Positive” ads focus on candidate qualities, while “negative” ads center in on weaknesses. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1997) recognize a series of opportunities in the use of positive communication in campaigns: improve candidate’s name recognition and candidate’s positive association with leadership characteristics, enhance similarities with voters, or improve candidate’s association with issues that citizens consider positive, foster an increase in electoral participation, foster favorable electoral environments, among others.

Crespo, Martínez and Riorda (2006) observe an increasing prevalence of negative campaigns: in the United States, negative messages represented 20% of campaign advertising during the 1980’s and reached two thirds in 2004. In 2006, 91% of 115 Republican ads were considered negative, while negative Democratic spots reached 81% of a total of 104 of their ads (Crespo, 2015). Attacks, which are characteristic of these types of campaigns, seek to reduce adhesions towards an opponent candidate or party, and collaterally reinforce the sympathy towards one’s own candidate or party. The purpose is to simplify and polarize the perception of voters, which reduces the complexity of scenarios that are multi-faceted and difficult to understand. A negative campaign serves to force an opponent to divert time and resources in self-defense, change the axis of the political debate and redefine the themes of the campaign agenda (García Beaudoux & D’Adamo, 2013). Proponents of this type of strategy claim that the penetration and memorization rate of negative ads is five times higher than that of positive or assertive messages (Shapiro & Rieger, 1992, cited in Crespo, 2015). In fact, it may be effective if it manages to increase the attention of voters, stimulating interpersonal conversation and generating greater interest and involvement in the campaign, even though it can foster significant cynicism during the electoral process and discourage voter participation (Crespo, 2015).

Functional theory of political campaign discourse, which arose out of persuasion studies relating to public image restoration and success discourse (Télez, Muñoz & Ramírez, 2011), recognizes three basic functions aimed at persuading voters: 1) “acclaims” are used to portray the positive aspects of a candidate or his/her political party; 2) “attacks” seek to demonstrate negative aspects of an opponent; and, 3) “defenses” attempt to prevent further damage from an earlier attack and restore a candidates’ preferability (Benoit, 1999; 2003). These three functions can occur in combination with other topics in campaign messages, such as: 1) certain policy issues or positions which include past events, future plans or general goals; and 2) the candidate’s image, which places emphasis on personal qualities, leadership ability, ideals and values.

This study takes the functions proposed by the functional theory of political campaign discourse and applies them to analyze the characteristics of the verbal language displayed in spots issued during the presidential campaigns of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in 2011, Hugo Chávez in 2012 and Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012. To this end, a review of the literature on this theoretical perspective is offered, and serves as a conceptual basis for this study.

In their approach to the analysis of electoral campaign ads, Benoit, Pier and Blaney (1997) draw from an extensive state of the art from research performed in the United States during the eighties and nineties. They found a number of regularities therein. The first aspect that they point out is that in most of these studies, contrarily to the myth that a candidate’s image predominates over other issues, greater emphasis is given to topics, also defined as “policy considerations” or simply as “policy topics” (Benoit *et al.*, 1997). The second observation relates to positive and negative ads. Even when spots combine positive and negative messages, one or the other may prevail with important variations depending

on the electoral campaign being studied. As mentioned above, negative messages prevail nowadays.

Benoit *et al.* (1997) add another characteristic: in the case of candidates who hold public office and seek to maintain or renew their position, the content of ads tends to be more positive rather than negative, while their contenders usually resort to negative messages rather than positive ones.

The main contribution made by Benoit and his colleagues, which we have used in this study, is the criticism of previous findings on which they build their own matrix. We describe here a few of their insights since they prove to be significant for the comparative analysis of three winning presidential political campaigns in Latin America: Argentina 2011, Venezuela 2012 and Mexico 2012. The literature on political campaigns has always analyzed spots as a whole unit. This implies establishing an exclusionary dichotomy between ads referring to issues and those referring to a candidate's character, thus preventing to show that there is an intimate relationship between both issues and character and that they may thereby coexist inside a single communication piece. So much so that a candidate's position on different issues tends to leave traces on his/her image, while a candidate's character will influence the perceptions that an audience will have on their policy positions (Benoit & Wells, 1996). As seen from the perspective of the candidate or political party, the attitude that he/she may possibly assume on different public interest issues can be used to legitimize his/her person (Devlin, 1987).

This manner of approaching a spot as a whole obstructs another dimension of the analysis: the difference between positive and negative messages. A dichotomous division is established, when they tend to coexist in the same ad. An additional nonsensical contradiction arises: the variable analyzed fails to be exhaustive, because it sets aside the defense strategy used in the case of attacks issued earlier by opponents. In view of those constraints, Benoit and his colleagues presented a series of improved proposals. Firstly, divide spots into smaller pieces and code each utterance independently, with the purpose of identifying the coexistence of different aspects within a single spot. This allows solving the exclusionary dichotomy between "topic/image" and "negative/positive" categories. Secondly, redefine these concepts with the aim of specifying the characteristics found in spots, while contemplating dimensions that are absent in the literature reviewed.

1) To rename the terms "issue" and "image", replacing them with "policy" and "character"². How do they justify this choice? The term "issue" as understood by these authors is not unambiguous. It may be understood as *points or topics of conflict in a discussion*, and at the same time, may be used as a *synonym of policy considerations*. To overcome this possible confusion, they propose an alternative terminology whereby statements alluding to *policy* and those referring to *the character or personality of the candidate* may be contrasted. Furthermore, they establish a more detailed category system for these two variables.

2) To the terms "negative" and "positive" which the authors redefine as "attacks" and "acclaims", they suggest adding a category that allows reaching greater depth in the analysis: the "defense" used by a candidate in reaction to an opponent's attack. They propose simultaneously analyzing the following two axes: a) whether "policy" aspects predominate over candidate "character" aspects in ads, and b) whether "acclaims", "attacks" or "defenses" are more dominant.

Following the critical review rationale in Benoit *et al.* (1997), this article involves a qualitative immersion in which concepts taken from the Functional Theory of Campaign Discourse are put into dialogue with the pieces that make up the corpus. This study seeks to

² In this study, the terms character and image are used indistinctively.

develop a matrix appropriate for conducting a comparative analysis of three winning presidential campaigns in the region. It recognizes a need for examining to what extent the elements that stand out in the campaign spots of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in 2011 (Argentina), Hugo Chávez in 2012 (Venezuela) and Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012 (Mexico) are contemplated by the definitions developed by William and Pamela Benoit, and which ones fall outside their scope. On this basis, it shall redefine certain analysis variables in order to systematize fundamental characteristics of winning campaign advertisements.

3. Research Questions

Six research questions are posed.

1. What discursive function —acclaim, attack or defense— prevailed in the campaign spots of winning candidates in the Argentina 2011 (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), Mexico 2012 (Enrique Peña Nieto) and Venezuela 2012 (Hugo Chávez) elections?
2. Did policy considerations prevail over those relating to the character of candidates³?
3. What relationship exists between discursive strategies⁴ and predominant topics in the pieces analyzed?
4. What temporal orientation prevails?
5. What degree of correlation can be established between the dominant discursive strategy, topic and time orientation?
6. What are the differences and similarities of the Argentina 2011, Mexico 2012 and Venezuela 2012 campaigns? Do the characteristic features of these campaigns match those that the Functional Theory of Discourse attributes to winning candidates of an electoral race?

4. Method

4.1. Unit of Analysis

The analytical procedure was designed in two steps. First, the corpus was assembled for coding. Given the existing disparity between advertising pieces, a criterion was established for unifying the quantity of spots selected per candidate in order to carry out the analysis. In this way, a sample of ten (10) advertising pieces was assembled for each candidate. The second step consisted in dividing the spots into themes, made up of utterances that address a coherent idea. The term “theme” is understood as “an individual assertion about a subject” (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969). According to this definition, a theme may vary in size from a single sentence or idea to several sentences. Ultimately, a theme is considered to be “the smallest unit of discourse that is capable of expressing a complete idea. Themes are statements, assertions, claims or arguments about a single point” (Benoit, 2006: 335). Establishing the theme as a unit allowed for greater precision in the analysis. Thus, the totality of themes in the ten spots for each candidate were selected; out of that total, the themes corresponding to the logo were left out, resulting in a sample composed of 139 recording units⁵ which were coded according to the codebook created for this study. In this

³ As mentioned in the previous section, the literature reviewed points to a greater use of the topic “policy” than the topic “character” of candidates.

⁴ The idea of “discursive strategy” (Télez *et al.*, 2011) has been added to that of “function” proposed by functional theory, insofar as we assume that it will add greater ductility to the content analysis.

⁵ The “recording units” are defined as smaller fragments of “sampling units”. The latter are “the material units which, taken together, make up the reality being researched and that must, at some stage, be collected and recorded to allow for the study” (Colle, 2011: 85). While the recording units are those that are directly subject to analysis (Colle, 2011; Krippendorff, 2004).

way, the following number of units were analyzed per candidate: thirty-one (31) units for Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (26,5% of total), sixty-one (61) units for Hugo Chávez (42,7% of total) and forty-seven (47) units for Enrique Peña Nieto (36% of total).

4.2. *Reliability*

Considering the polysemy in these types of texts, each spot was analyzed by two people, adding a high degree of credibility, as proposed by Benoit *et al.* (1997). Additionally, this procedure provided different points of view for contrasting variables taken from previous studies with the corpus under study, for determining whether or not some of these terms need to be redefined. Once the coding was completed, a new collection process was carried forth on a sample of 10% of the recording units, selected randomly through the [RAND] random function, with the purpose of estimating the reliability of the analysis (*intercoder reliability*). The Cohen Kappa coefficient had a reliability level that was above .7 in all cases: 1 for functions; .716 for topics (general); 1 for positive topics; .780 for negative topics; .811 for temporal direction; .811 for image leadership; .706 for image qualities; .742 for image values.

4.3. *Codebook*

The codebook was divided into three sections. The campaign discourse strategies (positive-acclaims, negative-attacks and defenses) were brought together with two topics: policy and candidate character. Then, it was determined whether “statements, assertions, claims or arguments about a single point” (Benoit, 2006: 335) had a temporal meaning directed towards the past or the future.

A codebook was created on the basis of variables suggested in earlier studies (Benoit *et al.*, 1997; Aruguete, 2013); starting with said matrices, a precise conceptualization was defined for each indicator.

Each unit of analysis was coded according to three strategies: 1) positive-acclaim advertisement, 2) negative-attack advertisement, or 3) defense.

I. Strategy. Several discursive strategies can coexist in a single spot. Furthermore, a careful analysis allows finding more than one function in each recording unit. However, with the purpose of identifying which strategy prevails, the dominant function was exclusively computed for each particular piece.

1. Positive-acclaim advertisement: a statement, argument or claim that refers to positive aspects of either a state of affairs or of a specific topic. Its purpose is to enhance the credentials of a candidate. Reference to political actions and decisions and their consequences are included (Téllez *et al.*, 2011). According to Benoit (1997), this function increases responsibility over an action and transmits a positive assessment.

2. Negative-attack advertisement: a negative characteristic of a state of affairs is described, putting it in relation to a specific historical context or with a past or present government administration. This strategy seeks to deprecate—in most cases but not exhaustively—the credentials of an opponent (candidate or party) and present him/her in an unfavorable way. The persuasive attack perspective developed by Benoit and Dorris (1996) is characterized by two fundamental components: an offensive act and the attribution of responsibility/culpability of the candidate for that act.

3. Defense: refutations of previous attacks made to the candidate or his/her party by an opponent are contemplated (Téllez *et al.*, 2011). This function addresses self-defense, explanation or image reparation.

II. In those cases where a unit is coded as a positive-acclaim advertisement, the aim is to discover if it refers to the following topics:

A) Policy: public interest situations, actions or issues that require governmental action. When it refers to this topic, a positive ad seeks to enhance the convenience or appeal of a particular action, carried forth in the past or proposed for the future, indistinctively.

The “policy” topic alluded to in positive advertisements may have a *retrospective* or *prospective* meaning, emphasizing: “past events/ endorsed public policies that were successful”; “proposed future plans”; “general goals”.⁶ Since a preliminary reading of the spots analyzed suggested that there were cases that exceeded the time constraints of the functional theory of discourse, the category “events of the recent past”, which refers to a current state of affairs, was included with the purpose of providing a more thorough analysis.

At the same time, references to the “policy” topic can be associated with different types of consequences. Here, this variable is considered as being present if *the positive effects over individuals* are mentioned or if *an extension of existing benefits* is granted, on a case-by-case basis, due to specific policy actions or decisions (Benoit, 1997). Finally, in these cases it is also possible to find references to the *candidate’s responsibility for the act in question*: this variable shall be computed if the candidate or any institution to which he/she is related is held accountable for positive actions, or if there is implicit mention to his/her responsibility revealing positive effects or benefits that clearly arise from actions he/she may have taken and/or a government administration he/she represents.

B) Candidate character or image: These are references to the character or personality of a candidate. Positive ads that center on this topic are revealed through characteristics relating to a candidate’s *leadership ability* (enhancing, on a case-by-case basis, his/her ability to overcome obstacles); *personal qualities* (these principally allude to his/her behavior towards others, not only peers but the citizenry as well); *ideals and values* (highlighting the maxims, ideas and plans that guide the actions of a candidate, his/her party or his/her government administration).

III. In those cases where a unit is coded as a negative-attack advertisement, the aim is to discover if it refers to the policy or character-image topics. These categories are mutually exclusive and only one is computed.

A) Policy: is subject to the same coding guidelines as for the “policy” topic under positive ads.

B) Candidate character or image: When the negative ad alludes to characteristics of an opponent or his/her party, emphasis is placed on *an offensive act*; *an offensive statement*; *an offensive quality*. Responsibility conferred to the offended candidate or party can take on many forms. By *commission*, if he/she explicitly committed, directed, caused or suggested the act. By *omission*, if he/she allowed the act to occur when it was in his/her power to avoid it.

IV. When a unit is coded as a defense, the aim is to discover if it refers to the policy or character-image topics. One category is computed and excludes the other. According to Benoit (1995) and Benoit and Anderson (1996), persuasive defense may take the form of

⁶ This category differs from “proposed goals or plans” since they are general intentions that do not have a clear and precise temporal reference.

diverse strategies: *denial* that may appear as a “simple denial” or a retraction, that is “put the blame on others”. The *evasion of responsibility* can be expressed as a “provocation of an opponent”, “an accident”; or the “good intentions of the candidate being defended” may be highlighted. *Reducing the offensiveness of an event* is pursued through “minimization”, “differentiation” or “compensation”. Finally, the offended candidate may resort to *mortification* as a persuasive defense strategy.

5. Analysis Results

This section analyzes the dominant characteristics of three political campaigns in Latin America. The spots of winning candidates in the presidential elections of Argentina in 2011 (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), Mexico in 2012 (Enrique Peña Nieto) and Venezuela in 2012 (Hugo Chávez) are compared. These three campaigns had a significant media impact in the region: two reelections in the cases of Argentina and Venezuela, and in the case of Mexico⁷, a change in the governing party which allowed the return of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, acronym in Spanish) to power (Aruguete & Riorda, 2013).

Argentina’s 2011 campaign was characterized by nonexistent levels of electoral competition. The election results were 54.11 percent for Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and 16.81 percent for runner-up Hermes Binner. The most forceful precedent of this result took place two months prior to the elections when the *Simultaneous and mandatory open primaries* (PASO, acronym in Spanish), when Kirchner positioned herself for reelection obtaining more than 50 percent of votes. Hence, during the two months of the presidential campaign, Fernández de Kirchner was able to carry out an eminently positive and smooth campaign.

Venezuela’s 2012 campaign, which presented greater competitiveness and took place within the context of Hugo Chávez’s illness—who passed away only months after his victory—and obtained 55.07 percent of votes facing second runner-up Henrique Capriles Radonsky, who obtained 44.31 percent of votes. The case of Mexico marked the return to power of the PRI in a race where Enrique Peña Nieto obtained 38.21 percent of votes against 31.59 percent obtained by opponent Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The analysis and comparison of the Mexican case with the other two elections is interesting since the winning candidate in Mexico does not represent a nationalist and populist model of government, as the other two candidates have defined themselves. In other words, between the three campaigns there are contexts of continuity and change, competitiveness and non-competitiveness, and ideological differences, which enrich the study’s approach and its conclusions.

The functional theory of political campaign discourse bases its analytical model on three major axes: discourse strategy, topics and direction (temporal orientation) of policies. In the first section we concentrate on the first two dimensions—discourse strategy and topic—, in their general behavior as well as in the different uses that these three candidates have made of said discourse function. Finally, we give an account of the relationship between the temporal orientation and the types of messages in the discourses of the different campaigns.

5.1. Discursive strategy and dominant topics

The literature refers to a significant use of acclaims. In comparative terms, it is observed that candidates with the best chances of winning resort to using this type of strategy (Aruguete, 2013; Benoit, 1999; Benoit *et al.*, 1997; Téllez *et al.*, 2011). This statement has been

⁷ Rafael Correa’s campaign was also highly media intensive, but it did not fulfill the double condition of representing a large country in the region.

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reviewed considering the argument that there has been a progressive predominance of negativity in the messages of both winning and losing candidates (Crespo *et al.*, 2006; D'Adamo & Riorda, 2016). Within the context of this theoretical-empirical discussion, there is an interest in calling negativity into question as the manifestation of a trend towards the “Americanization” of campaigns (Mancini, 1995). We observe that, at least for Latin America, negativity is not been a novel strategy among the candidates analyzed.

In general terms, the campaigns in this study present a predominance of “acclaiming” ads (85.6%; N=119) over attacking ads (13.7%; N= 19) and over the practically null use of defenses (0.7%; N=1). From a disaggregated and comparative reading, we propose reviewing the idea that it is those candidates with the greatest chances of winning who present a higher percentage of positive ads. By contrasting the three candidacies we observe that the winners who marked the greatest distance from their contenders were not those who most used acclaims. Argentine elections had very low levels of electoral competition in comparison with the elections in Venezuela and Mexico. However, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner appealed to positive messages to a lesser degree than Hugo Chávez and Enrique Peña Nieto (see Table 1).

Table 1. Prevailing discursive strategy, by candidate

DISCOURSE STRATEGY	CANDIDATES		
	CFK	EPN	HCh
Positive/Acclaim	73,3% (N= 22)	93,6% (N= 44)	85,5% (N= 53)
Negative/Attack	26,7% (N= 8)	4,3% (N= 2)	14,5% (N= 9)
Defense	0%	2,1% (N=1)	0%
Total	100% (N=30)	100% (N=47)	100% (N=62)

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of 10 spots for candidates CFK, HCh and EPN, 139 recording units⁸

In a recent paper on this same subject (Aruguete, 2013) it was shown that in the 2011 CFK presidential campaign positive statements were strongly associated with “policy considerations” rather than with candidate “image” (56.5%; N=13 and 39.1%; N=9, respectively). This pattern changes when the campaigns of winning candidates for Venezuela and Mexico are included. In this sense, the three campaigns show a preponderance of statements relating to the character of candidates (57.6%; N= 80) over those that refer to “policy issues” (32.4%; N= 45), while 9.4% (N=13) are recorded under the “Other” category. Another finding worth highlighting is the important correlation between “acclaims” and the “image” topic, which taken in all three campaigns far exceeds the “positive” tone for the “policy” topic (see Table 2).

Table 2. Prevailing discursive strategy according to topic, the three candidates together

TOPIC	STRATEGY		
	Acclaim	Attack	Defense
Image	63,9% (N=76)	21,1% (N=4)	100% (N=1)
Policy	28,6% (N=34)	57,9 % (N=11)	0%
Other	7,6% (N=9)	21,1% (N=4)	0%
Total	100% (N=100)	100% (N=19)	100% (N=1)

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of 10 spots for candidates CFK, HCh and EPN, 139 recording units

⁸ The spots were taken from the official YouTube accounts of the candidates.

- Enrique Peña Nieto: <https://www.youtube.com/user/EnriquePenaNietoTV>

- Hugo Chávez <https://www.youtube.com/user/misionchavezcandanga/>

- Cristina Fernández de Kirchner <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn6dSnBhdI>

Additionally, the spots selected for this study have been included in an annex.

However, how does the relationship between “discourse function” and “topic” develop in each one of the campaigns? What types of considerations do the candidates mostly resort to? First, it was observed that Cristina Fernández de Kirchner draws heavily on the “policy” topic, while Enrique Peña Nieto fundamentally bases his messages on his “image”, followed by Hugo Chávez, who also concentrates a large portion of ads on his “character” (see Table 3).

Table 3. Dominant topic in campaigns, according to candidate

TOPIC	CANDIDATES		
	CFK	EPN	HCh
Policy	60% (N= 18)	17% (N= 8)	32,2% (N= 20)
Image	26,7% (N= 8)	74,5% (N= 35)	59,7% (N= 37)
Other	13,3% (N= 4)	8,5% (N= 4)	8,1% (N= 5)
Total	100% (N= 30)	100% (N= 47)	100% (N= 62)

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of 10 spots for candidates CFK, HCh and EPN, 139 recording units

The distinctive use of topics sheds light on the characteristic features of these political speeches. Fernández de Kirchner presents her achievements in government —a high percentage of the “policy” topic is laid out on an acclaiming discourse— through storytelling. The people whose experiences are reconstructed here are the clear result of the implementation of public policies, which broaden the access of the population to basic rights. This was the symbolic signature advocated by both “Kirchnerist” administrations. Something similar occurs in Hugo Chávez’s spots, which are heavily founded on the narrative of stories that illustrate the results of his policies and missions. The difference between these two candidates lies in the fact that the stories used in the spots on Chávez are closely related to his personal qualities (36.1%) and values (41%). The common denominator of both campaigns is the use of storytelling to illustrate concrete actions from a more emotional viewpoint. We offer three examples that illustrate this characteristic.

Policy Topic I (storytelling): “... we are not giving away anything by granting you this scholarship, it is a gift that you are giving us all”.⁹

“The Strength of Brian (Toledo)” spot narrates his journey as a professional athlete and his opportunity to participate in the Olympic Games thanks to a public policy for athlete scholarships. The consequences of said policy could even be thought of as having “positive effects for the population as a whole”¹⁰. However, the ad is built around the personal history of the protagonist, with high levels of emotivity. Similarly, “The strength of Cecilia” spot tells the story of an Argentine scientist who was repatriated through the Roots program (*Programa Raíces*, in Spanish).

Policy Topic II (storytelling): “In 2009, the Argentine Embassy called on all Argentine scientists and stated: ‘Your country values and recognizes you, and if you want to return the doors are wide open’. To hear that so many miles away is like required love”.¹¹

⁹ Fragments of the ad “*La fuerza de Brian*” or “The Strength of Brian” (CFK, Argentina). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt6Pd7cx_Tw

¹⁰ Three possible consequences derive from the “policy” topic: 1. General consequences; 2. Positive effects on the population; 3. Extension of benefits.

¹¹ Fragments of the ad “*La fuerza de Cecilia*” or “The strength of Cecilia” (CFK, Argentina). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO1ztDWzRPA>

A similar example is “A Dream Come True”, a spot in Hugo Chávez’s campaign. It narrates the story of Wolfgang Eduardo Mejías, an athlete who represents his country in the fencing competition. The spot clearly shows the ‘consequences’ of the promotion this young man experienced thanks to the National Sports Plan, although several segments of his story seek to highlight the personal qualities and values of President Chávez. This can also be seen in other ads where the “image” topic overlaps “policy considerations” through the telling of emotionally charged intimate stories (*Misión Gran Vivienda Venezuela 2012*, *Gran Misión Hijos de Venezuela*).

Image Topic (storytelling): “They are two separate changes. See for yourselves, from being nobody to becoming great ... long live Chávez”.¹²

Imbrication of Image and Policy Topics: “Until this (Simon) Bolivar appeared, the man who saved my family from poverty ... I never dreamed of living here, not even by working my entire life”.¹³

In Enrique Peña Nieto’s ads, the relevance of “image” surpasses that of the “policy” topic, with an emphasis placed on his values (53.2%; N= 25) more than on his leadership (38.2%; N= 18) or his image (27.7%; N= 13). This is a characteristic that is highlighted in the spot on his tour of Mexico, “Recorrido por la República Mexicana”:

Image Predominance: “You will see me walking each and every one of the States in the region, looking at people in their eyes, giving you my word, committing myself to you and to all Mexicans”.¹⁴

Like the Venezuelan campaign, the distinction made between the “policy consideration” and “character” topics by the Mexican candidate does not clearly appear within the recording units. Many of the references to policy decisions made during his role as Governor of the State of Mexico and the promises he would fulfill should he reach the presidency of Mexico, are strongly interwoven with his personal qualities, values and ideals. In the example that follows, the “character” topic dominates, in which case it excludes the “policy” topic, but a closer look reveals that the centrality of EPN’s “personality” is present every time the candidate expresses the promises for a future national government.

Imbrication of Policy and Image Topics: “... as president of Mexico I will commit to drive the modernization of the agricultural sector so as to make it more productive. My goal is to ensure that Mexicans remain close to their families, while improving their standards of living”.¹⁵

Another spot that illustrates the predominance of the “image” over the “policy” topic is the advertisement entitled “*Recorrido por la Ciudad de México*”, which is presented below.

Predominance of Image over Policy Considerations: “I believe that what has to be done here involves the commitment to everyone and not only to a few people”.¹⁶

¹² Fragment of the ad “*Un sueño hecho realidad, Wolfgang Eduardo Mejías cuenta su historia*” or “A dream come true, Wolfgang Eduardo Mejías tells his story” (HCh, Venezuela) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiHRcfa9a_o

¹³ Fragment of ad: “*Andrés Ospino, Misión Gran Vivienda Venezuela 2012*” or “Andrés Ospino, 2012 Venezuelan Great Housing Mission” (HCh, Venezuela). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJdrrqXeYjY>

¹⁴ Fragments of advertisement “*Recorrido por la República Mexicana*” (EPN, México): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uihjQQoLyzo&NR=1&feature=endscreen>

¹⁵ Fragment of advertisement “*Recorrido por Zacatecas*” (EPN, México): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-QBKEw1Mdm>

¹⁶ Fragment of advertisement: “*Recorrido por Distrito Federal*” (EPN, México): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sunG67pZm4>

5.2. Discourse strategy and topic according to candidates

Are there similarities in the characteristics of the major advertising pieces of presidential candidates, in particular, concerning the relationship between “discursive strategy” and predominant “topic”? On this point, we found continuities and differences between the Argentine, Mexican and Venezuelan campaigns (see Table 4).

Table 4. Relationship between discursive strategy and dominant topic, by candidate

CANDIDATES	STRATEGY	TOPIC	
		Policy	Image
CFK	Positive/Acclaim	68,4% (N= 13)	100% (N= 8)
	Negative/Attack	31,6% (N= 6)	0%
EPN	Positive/Acclaim	87,5% (N= 7)	97,1% (N= 34)
	Negative/Attack	12,5% (N= 1)	0%
	Defense	0%	2,9% (N= 1)
HCh	Positive/Acclaim	77,8% (N= 14)	91,9% (N= 34)
	Negative/Attack	22,2% (N= 4)	8,1% (N= 3)

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of 10 spots for candidates CFK, HCh and EPN, 139 recording units

A clearly homogeneous trait is the strong “positive” tone associated with each reference to the “image” of these politicians: in the three cases, almost all of the arguments referring to “character” take the form of an “acclaim”. With regards to the “policy considerations” a generalized positive vein is also visible, although it is more pronounced in the Argentine and Mexican campaigns than it is in the Venezuelan campaign. Why does this occur? There are two elements that can be mentioned in this regard.

As developed in the previous section, the advertisements of CFK and HCh, which describe beneficial public policies for the population, rely heavily on storytelling. These stories portray characters belonging to disadvantaged social sectors who, having lived negative experiences —which chronologically correspond to the government administrations that preceded those of presidents Cristina Fernández and Hugo Chávez—, manage to reverse their situations through the access to different government programs. This rationale is present in the “positive” and “negative” framing of the spots under study. Prior to holding office, the protagonists in these spots were marginalized, and through the promotion of public policies under their respective governments, they became “citizens with rights”. However, one particularity mentioned earlier is worth noting: in Chávez’s spots the description of these intimate stories leave imprints of his image: “this (Simon) Bolivar”, “I love him like a son”, “long live Chávez”, among others. Several examples illustrate this characteristic of the former Bolivarian president: a leader with an aura. According to Devlin (1987), it may happen that the attitude one assumes towards diverse affairs of public interest may be used to legitimize ones persona.

Imprint of Candidate’s Image in Storytelling, HCh Campaign: “I have a saying that goes like this: ‘First God, second my Commander’”¹⁷. “I am not God to tell you what to do, but what I do know is that together we will conquer”¹⁸. “Special needs children had never received government aid, ever. Only with this President”¹⁹.

¹⁷ Fragment of advertisement: “Andrés Ospino, Misión Gran Vivienda Venezuela 2012” (HCh, Venezuela). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJdrrqXeYjY>

¹⁸ Fragment of advertisement: “Chávez Corazón del Pueblo” (HCh, Venezuela). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pbIkeZR24s

¹⁹ Fragment of advertisement: “Ziomara Quintana. Gran Misión Hijos de Venezuela” (HCh, Venezuela). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5bP8fp_ff8

In the case of Enrique Peña Nieto, the art of storytelling centers on his autobiography. That is why the “positive” attribute of his “image” is all the greater than in the other two campaigns. For its part, the “positive” component of the “policy” topic is very high in all of the cases analyzed. However, considering that not all candidates run to renew their political office, recurring to “policy considerations” presents certain particularities. In theory, the relationship between “policy” and “acclaims” follows a similar pattern in the cases of Kirchner and Chávez. That is, these are presidential administrations that hold office at the moment of their candidacies and who propose the continuity and “deepening” of their “models”. In contrast, Peña Nieto is a candidate who represents change so his “policy considerations” are divided into two types: references made to events achieved under his administration of the government of the State of Mexico and promises made for his presidential administration.

5.3. Temporal orientation

Campaign discourse is usually directed towards the past or the future. The retrospective statements of candidates point to past deeds or evidence that support their performance, versus prospective references that focus on goals that are yet uncertain (Télez *et al.*, 2011). With respect to this dimension, the overall temporality of the “policy” topic was measured for the three campaigns. It was found that the “retrospective” and “prospective” meanings were surpassed by the “Other” category. This confirmed the shortfalls of measuring whether messages were directed towards the past or future, in an aggregated way. Similarly, the computation of comments on past events vis a vis future proposals or general objectives was deficient. Therefore, this study proposes a redefinition of the “temporal orientation” variable, which will henceforth be composed of the following categories: “past events”, “future plans”, “general goals” and “events of the recent past”.

With the purpose of enriching the discourse analysis, we set aside the generic variable of the retrospective vote, expressed by Downs and Eysenck (cited in Riorda, 2004), who consider past and present advantages, as they make up what is known as day-to-day administration. If this were not the case, the classic retrospective function would probably be widely accepted, as it would include reference to the past as well as the future. The need to redefine this variable responds to a salient characteristic that was repeatedly identified in the analysis of these reelection campaigns, especially in those of Cristina Fernández and Hugo Chávez, which we intend to highlight. In said discourses there is an evident difference between events of a distant past that exceed the timespan of their current administrations, versus a recent past that is included within the period of their respective presidencies, which is presented in ads with a strong acclamatory signature.

Table 5. Relationship between temporal orientation and predominant function

TEMPORAL ORIENTATION	DISCOURSE STRATEGY		
	Positive / Acclaim	Negative / Attack	Defense
Past Events	33,3% (N= 9)	100% (N= 27)	0%
Future Plans	7,4% (N= 2)	0%	0%
General Goals	14,8% (N= 4)	0%	0%
Recent Past Events	40,7% (N= 11)	0%	0%
Total	100% (N= 26)	100% (N= 27)	0%

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of 10 spots for candidates CFK, HCh and EPN, 139 recording units

By crossing “discourse function” with “temporal orientation” it becomes evident that certain campaigns in Latin America are not strictly and collectively directed towards the past or the future. There are two characteristics found here that are worth highlighting: “acclaims” are more often associated with “events in the recent past” than with “past events” and “future proposals”, whereas “attacks” are fully associated with “past events”. But, once again, how far back in time? To answer this question it is necessary to establish the relationship between “function” and “temporal orientation” inside each campaign so as to identify similarities and differences. In spots that narrate stories where a candidate’s image and voice appear in the background or in spots where they directly address the camera, the “attack” function is associated with “past events” in 100 percent of cases. Such is the case of the Argentine and Venezuelan campaigns that share the same argumentative rationale. They both use “negative” discourse strategies to address that state of affairs preceding their administrations. Added to this is the fact that negative considerations appear in the context of discourses that finalize with different types of acclaims. In other words, negative phrases exist to the extent that they give way to happy endings.

Past negative events that end with an acclaim I, HCh campaign: “Disabled children had never received government aid, ever. Only with this President”.²⁰

Past negative events that end with an acclaim II, CFK campaign: “I worked in a shipyard until the crisis in the nineties. Then, I had the worst job ever, looking for a job... One day my phone rang at home and a person on the other end said: ‘Atilio, please come to the shipyard, the company is restarting and we need you’”.²¹

We found two differences between both candidates. On the one hand, Hugo Chávez outnumbers Cristina Fernández in his use of “acclaims” to refer to “recent past events” (71.4% and 28.6%, respectively). On the other hand, the Bolivarian candidate differentiates himself from the Argentine candidate in the type of prospective policies that he displays: Chávez proposes concrete ‘plans for the future’ in 28.6% of cases, whereas Fernández de Kirchner alludes to ‘general goals’ in 14.3% of her ads. The Mexican candidate’s campaign is different in this respect. “Past events” (33.3%) and “recent past events” (16.7%) are rarely shown in “positive” terms, versus a high 50% obtained for “general goals”. Concrete ‘plans’ understood as promises for a future government are left out here.

Prospective orientation based on general goals, EPN Campaign: “... as president of Mexico I will commit to drive the modernization of the agricultural sector so as to make it more productive”.²²

It should be noted that the Mexican candidate’s campaign is based on a narrative about his achievements during his previous administration as Governor of the State of Mexico — where he amasses positive references— and through proposals for a future national government, which would have the same signature as his role in office as governor.

6. Discussion

This comparative analysis carried out on three recent winning presidential campaigns in Latin America (Argentina 2011; Venezuela 2012 and Mexico 2012), presents the main findings that provide answers to the research questions posed. Accordingly, the appropriateness of

²⁰ Fragment of ad: “*Ziomara Quintana. Gran Misión Hijos de Venezuela*” (HCh, Venezuela). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5bP8fp_ff8

²¹ Fragment of ad: “*La fuerza de Atilio*” (CFK, Argentina). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS1M4--S5vw>

²² Fragment of ad: “*Recorrido por Zacatecas*” (EPN, México). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-QBKEw1MdM>

the dimensions of analysis proposed by the functional theory of campaign discourse for the corpus under study are discussed.

Discourse function. As in previous studies, in the cases analyzed claims prevail that refer to positive aspects of a state of affairs or of a specific theme, with the evident purpose of enhancing the candidate's credentials. However, contrary to what several authors propose (Benoit, 1999; Benoit *et al.*, 1997; Téllez *et al.*, 2011), the rule by which candidates with more chances of winning are those who resort more frequently to this type of strategy in their ads is not fulfilled. Cristina Kirchner, who showed lower competitiveness than her peers in Venezuela and Mexico, was not the candidate who most appealed to "acclaims" (CFK= 71.9%, HCh= 87.5% y EPN= 94.4%).

Policy versus image. Scholars of functional theory of campaign discourse have refuted the "myth" of the primacy of a candidate's image over his/her stance on policy issues. This is another hypothesis that is not validated here. The three campaigns as a whole demonstrate that reference to image practically duplicates reference to policy issues, even though the comparative analysis indicates differences. Cristina Fernández resorts to policy issues more so than Enrique Peña Nieto and Hugo Chávez, who base at the very least half of their campaign ads on their leadership, personal qualities and most importantly, their values and ideals, highlighting the maxims and ideas that guide their respective actions. In part, this explains the intense correlation that exists between the positive function and a candidate's character.

The analysis of this dimension presents two other findings. The first one relates to the "policy" topic. Stories on public policies that benefit and provide basic rights to the population are significantly based on storytelling. In the campaigns of Hugo Chávez and Cristina Fernández the discourse strategy of storytelling has been highly effective because it includes narrative principles that are easy to comprehend and due to its ability to mobilize, seduce, and engage by triggering emotions and senses, and proposing a vision of the past, present and future (D'Adamo & García Beaudoux, 2013).

The second dimension alludes to the coexistence (in a single theme, that is, a single utterance) of the "policy" and "character" topics. Said imbrication fundamentally occurs in the cases of the Venezuelan and Mexican candidates. Chávez combines the public "Missions" propelled during his administrations (*Misión Gran Vivienda, Gran Misión Hijos de Venezuela*) with strong imprints of his character, especially, his personal qualities and his aura. For his part, all of Peña Nieto's statements about his achievements as governor of the State of Mexico as well as his promises for a future government stated in the maxims and plans communicated by the candidate. In this sense, we believe there is an inevitable coexistence between these discursive resources inside the spots (Benoit and Wells, 1996; Devlin, 1987). In other words, we assume that the policy stances of the candidates leave imprints which configure the traits of their personality, while the arguments enhancing their credentials rest on policy issues rather than the presentation of their image.

Temporal considerations. A clear discursive manifestation that prioritizes two predominant characteristics is evident. Firstly, "acclaims" are more heavily associated with "recent past events" than with "past events" or "future proposals", and, secondly, "attacks" are entirely linked to "past events". This equates to propounding that the retrospective function emerges as a negative element from which campaigns and candidates differentiate themselves from, and that the present function appears as positive discourse that accounts for a state of affairs that must be defended, valued, emphasized and consolidated on the basis of continuity.

Comparative Analysis. Throughout this section a series of differences between the candidates analyzed were noted—Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Enrique Peña Nieto y Hugo Chávez— which also exhibit a "deviation" in their campaign discourse logic regarding the analytical parameters established by the functional theory of political campaign

discourse. These aspects are considered as the most notable findings of this empirical study. We also recognize similarities relative to the acclaiming nature of their ads: overall, acclaims are found in 85.6% of spots. In disaggregated terms, CFK has over 73.3% positive messages, although largely outstripped by the Venezuelan and Mexican candidates, with nine out of ten spots glorifying her administrations as well as her values and personal qualities (85.5% and 93.6% respectively).

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Annex: Campaign spots

1. Enrique Peña Nieto

"Recorrido por la República Mexicana"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1hjQQoLyzo&NR=1&feature=endscreen>

"Recorrido Distrito Federal"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sunG67pZm4>

"Recorrido Aguascalientes"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sno87TnJHWQ&NR=1&feature=endscreen>

"Recorrido Oaxaca"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&v=woSnI3d-Xro&NR=1>

"Resumen 60 días de Campaña"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-BJZY7uSVI>

"Logros de Gobierno del Estado de México"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJyPxFoAmE>

"Peña Sí Cumple"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVa4zSfvQ2o>

"Biografía"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDOWcuiywtQ&feature=endscreen&NR=1>

"Llamado al Voto"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFCEsn5rmjw>

"Este 10 de julio con tu voto México va a Cambiar"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ea5w4oNeUg>

"Es Momento de México"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRQoGPVn5Oo>

"Somos la Fuerza"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgyQsqPLtcc&NR=1&feature=endscreen>

Resumen 60 días de Campaña

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-BJZY7uSVI>

2. Hugo Chávez

"Alma Buena - Corazón Venezolano"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnxMF8EfZzM>

"Usted de aquí no se va - Corazón Venezolano"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaQ_tXTPobs

"Andrés Ospino, Misión Gran Vivienda Venezuela 2012" (Preelectoral Hugo Chávez)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJdrqXeYjY>

"Ziomara Quintana Gran Misión Madres del Barrio de 2012" (Preelectoral Hugo Chávez)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5bP8fp_ff8

"Con 78 años, Juana Sotillo disfruta su vejez gracias a la Misión En Amor Mayor"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9gl7FKdci4>

"Soy Chávez de corazón"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRV7YIm1sts>

"Un sueño hecho realidad, Wolfgang Eduardo Mejías cuenta su historia"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiHRcfaga_o

"Canción Chávez Corazón del Pueblo"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbIkeZR24s>

"Hugo Chávez y nosotros"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K2qGItNNuw>

“¡Globos! Chávez, Corazón de mi Patria”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWE85UdXHuo>

“Votar por Chávez es defender la Independencia petrolera y garantizar calidad de vida”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooFLGWf4wmw>

3. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner

“La Fuerza de Cecilia”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO1ztDWzRPA>

“La Fuerza de Haydeé”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss9LHPQHLYU>

“La Fuerza de Jéscica”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLSzo8JwQWQ>

“La fuerza de Brian”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt6Pd7ex_Tw

“La Fuerza de la Alegría”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbPT7qqOrno>

“La fuerza de un país”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMurpT4oVL8>

“La Fuerza de Atilio”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS1M4--S5vw>

“La Fuerza de la producción”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPgAcEclQUc>

“La fuerzas de la unión”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b1rdvuy8rw>

“La Fuerza de la Educación”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdDJUmYPrmY>