

Rhetoric of reasons and emotions in times of crisis

Retoryka racji i emocji w czasach kryzysu

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Spirals of fear: 2021 Presidential Elections in Ecuador
Spirale lęku: wybory prezydenckie z 2021 roku w Ekwadorze

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Introduction

This short research note aims to present the overview of a recent Ecuadorian mediated political campaign that was characterized by unusually high levels of fear appeals. According to Altheide (1997), formats and frames that are used to shape mass media content have the capacity to instruct the members of the society what to worry about, for instance money, health, status, war, immigrants etc. This means that the targets of fear appeals are not objective but socially constructed in the public arena, but nevertheless perceived as real and consequential. Meanwhile, fear is built based on communications and social interactions centering on threats and dangers. Rhetorically constructed spirals of fear characterize the mediated socialization processes and are often exploited as a way for the legitimation of political decisions (e.g., with some electoral choices presented as “lesser of two evils”).

The aim of the following sections is to sketch the context of 2021 presidential election in Ecuador, to characterize the discourse of fear in the context of politics, to apply the model of spirals of fear to the analyzed campaign and to list the main rhetorical devices that were deployed to generate fear appeals.

Ecuadorian Politics

In the last few years, South America has seen four presidential elections that stand out not only because they were carried out in the pandemic, but also for the results and the vicissitudes around them, namely in Ecuador, Peru, Chile, or Bolivia. The common denominator of these elections was the polarization of the societies for political reasons, and a series of social protests throughout 2019 and 2020 that were stopped due to the pandemic but which catalyzed social changes.

In Ecuador, a small country on the Equator line with approximately 17 million people, the social rift was evident, and the 2021 election contributed to perpetuating it further. Just to get into the context, it must be mentioned that the currently elected president, a right-wing politician Guillermo Lasso, won the runoff with a very small margin (52%) after a debated first round where he was able to reach

no more than 20% of votes. Yet, as the Final Report of the EU-EOM¹ mentions, the general elections were organized in a context of a pandemic, economic difficulties, political fragmentation, and numerous uncertainties, but despite the tensions of the first round, the elections ended peacefully with the verdict of the Ecuadorians and the immediate acceptance of the results by the contenders who lost the election, that is, Andrés Arauz and his running mate Carlos Rabascall from the left-wing union (European Stability Mechanism, 2021).

However, to understand the implications of this, it is necessary to look a little further into the past. Ecuador's socio-political divisions started during the long period of the presidency of social democrat Rafael Correa (2007-2017), and his party successor Lenin Moreno (2017-2021), who turned away from the social and progressive project "Revolución Ciudadana"², and towards a more neoliberal government. In turn, the opposition to conservatives evolved and consolidated to confront the feared political turn of "*correísmo*"³. Hence in 2021, 13 million Ecuadorians were called to the polls under visible political discontent with the institutions such as the National Assembly (parliament) and the outgoing president, whose approval ratings plummeted to between 4% and 11%, according to the portal Ecuador Verifica (2021).

The political spectrum during the 2021 electoral campaign was highly fragmented, with an unusually high number of presidential candidates – sixteen. Still, in these elections, the political discourse was divided predominantly between *correísmo* and *anti-correísmo*. While Andrés Arauz with the leftist alliance UNES (Unión por la Esperanza) was linked to the *correísmo*, Guillermo Lasso with the rightist alliance of two traditional political parties CREO (political movement Creando Oportunidades) and PSC (Partido Social Cristiano), and Yaku Perez from the political movement Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik, representing the left-wing indigenous movement, took a charge at the presidency. The results of the first round confirmed Arauz (33%) as a victory of the *correísmo* but the distance between Lasso (19.7%) and Pérez (19.4%) was tied, which called for a runoff.

This panorama reminded the election in 2013, where Correa won in the first round with 57% of the votes over the 22% for Lasso. Indeed, this perception of Rafael Correa coming back alerted the right-wing partisans and the media who undertook a race almost against the clock to prevent it, thus beginning a campaign based mainly on fear, which ultimately lifted Lasso to presidency.

1. European Union – Election Observation Missions

2. The Revolución Ciudadana or "Citizens Revolution" was the name of the programs adopted by Rafael Correa and his party "Alianza País" to denominate his social and progressivist policies.

3. *Correísmo* and *anti-correísmo* are the words created after Rafael Correa's last name to label a political tendency: social-progressive vs. neoliberal-conservative.

Discourse of fear

Yet, at this point is necessary to discuss the role of fear appeals and the discourse of fear generated on the agenda in the context of the elections. According to Castells (2009), power is exercised by coercion, or by the construction of meaning based on discourses through which social actors promote the actions. Hence, the organization and discourses that frame and regulate social life are never the expression of society, but an interpretation under different perspectives of the dominant actors. In the Ecuadorian case, political discourses have been constructed around agendas and meanings based on comparisons to (the currently failed state of) Venezuela (socialism and regime, poverty and corruption) and the society takes them as valid.

For some authors, the discourse of fear takes place due to the culture of fear in which societies tend to live as a response to the permanent risks humanity has lived with or believed in. However, there is another source of building risks based on media outlets propagating risk-focused messaging (Wodak 2020). In fact, many of these mediatized risks appear to us as invisible, diffuse, and yet consequential for daily decision-making. That is exactly what happened in Ecuador, when media outlets generated information based on fear and the society largely followed that.

Spirals of fear in the campaign

Spirals of fear tend to result from the convergence of media and political actions that configure the public space. Usually at first, the media decontextualize news generating perceptions of negativity, distortion, sensationalism, or exaggeration, and in a second move, they recontextualize fear discourses their informative forms. This process applies for both traditional or new digital media outlets, because fear dynamics are quite similar, “every era promotes fear, the nature of fear and the methods of its promotion simply differ” (Altheide 2002, 14).

These spirals of fear can also be related to the spiral of silence mentioned by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, that is, the negative perception around *correísmo* and its members generated a frame of fear that voters likely to support this party avoided mentioning it. However, at the polls, support higher than 48% was still perceived (Primicias, 2021). So fierce was the hostility in the public sphere during the presidential campaign that for example the manager of EcuATrans, an Ecuadorian company, threatened to fire employees who vote for Arauz (Radio La Calle, 2021).

In the Ecuadoran elections, most of the discourses were antagonistic to and critical of *correísmo*, highlighting the necessity of the avoidance of socialism at all costs (Altamirano-Benítez, Ruíz-Aguirre, Baquerizo-Neira 2022). This was done

by referring to the Venezuelan example on the one hand, and the corruption cases discovered during Correa's terms on the other. The accusations concerned Correa himself, who was charged with corruption but convicted only for influence on it (Telesur 2020).

Fear frames, narratives, and rhetorical devices

Nowadays, fear is either a part of the general context of crisis, or the way to present specific events or phenomena. According to the framing theory, these fears are constructed in public communication to engender permanent predispositions and to distract people from other issues. For instance, the false dichotomy "either Ecuador or Venezuela" was playing on the fear of losing the source of national identity in view of the massive migration of Venezuelans and the catastrophic economic and social crisis in that country. The slogan made sense to the Ecuadorians without the need for any analysis, as that fear had become a palpable reality on the streets.

This message is also a good example to demonstrate the importance of the narrative in the construction of fear. Narratives provide ordered and simplified meaning frames that are easy to communicate, comprehend, remember, and influence society. They usually feature heroes and villains, sequences of events and have clearly defined settings and timeframes, as well as moral messages. Narratives evoke stories of the collective memory, ideological beliefs, agendas of current debates, including threats, because in the simplest way, fear is a reaction to danger (Ventsel et al. 2019).

Indeed, the fears and concerns are connected to mass mediated news frames, and it is undeniable that the news contributes to public agendas, political rhetoric, and public perception of social problems. Briefly analyzing the campaign from the rhetorical perspective, it can be mentioned that the following rhetorical devices were important ingredients of the discourse of fear:

- *Antagonism, binary oppositions, polarization*: the clash in the society was evident and the rhetoric of contenders expressing it on different levels: ideological, political, and socio-economic. The whole range of social and political stances was reduced to "us" vs "them".
- *Positive vs negative moral categories*: attributing evil intentions to the opponent, and good intentions to self. In this case, corruption was associated with the *correístas* in a very aggressive way, for instance, media started to publish names people who was investigated, ignoring the presumption of innocence and "sentencing" in the public eye ahead of the elections. As it is

known, some of them are in jail for corruption associated with the famous Odebrecht case (Fiscalía General del Estado 2022) and for that, corruption was on top of the main concerns within the public opinion.

- *The pathos of national pride*: evident in the division of the electorate based on the fear of “not being the other” and played out by the dichotomies “*correístas* vs. *anti-correístas*,” “dollarization vs. local currency,” “Ecuador or Venezuela” (alluding to the painful economic situation of that country). Sensationalizing the threat to national identity in the media, specifically digital media outlets and opinion-leaders on Twitter to show how the concept of “not being” instigated not only fear but also a radical differentiation with “the other.”
- *The ethos of the protector*: giving legitimacy to one candidate who met the expectations of protecting the self against the other, beyond ideologies. Mobilizing “all of us”- the good ones - against “them” the “bad *correístas*” generating in turn the spiral of silence that implied that whoever is against us is not loyal to the country.
- *The limited logos*, relying on very basic discourse and conceptualization of economy, politics or society drawn from tabloid media and opinion leaders mentioning “or Ecuador or Venezuela” exemplified by a slogan “prosperity with one candidate or poverty with the *correísta* associated with socialism”. Considering the large number of Venezuelan migrants living in the streets of Ecuador due to the crisis in their country, such short and simple messages had a lot of power to catalyze fear, without analyzing economic contexts or political facts that can easily defeat that kind of arguments because the realities of both countries are different.

Conclusion

The Ecuadorian public sphere and political landscape before the election was hard enough for ordinary people to follow and understand, especially as many have traditionally been nonpartisan. The media did not help to analyze, interpret, order and contrast the information provided by the contenders prior to vote. Moreover, in a society where the media has always had the power to influence in political decisions, the probability of voters escaping powerful propagandas was almost nil, despite the effort of some new digital media outlets to provide interview spaces for analysts to meditate the vote.

The discourse of fear is still a powerful tool as it was briefly analyzed here, so banishing it will depend on how much the media can be democratized in the future and how critical people are in upcoming elections. The media crisis generated with

the progressive governments of the region years ago was not enough to achieve their restructuring or change of practices, and the penetration of new digital media has only replicated patterns that rely on fear and risk. Therefore, the promulgation of independent media and citizen oversight of their practices is vital to avoid electoral decisions made based on fear.

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