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# The Disenchanted Voter

## Emotional Attachment, Social Stratification, and Mediated Politics in Mexico's 2006 Presidential Election

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This study of micro-level political decision making responds to an initially perplexing phenomenon that appeared in the 2006 Mexican presidential election, what the authors call the disenchanted voter. The authors found that participants in their longitudinal, qualitative study expressed extreme dissatisfaction with politics, politicians, and the outcomes of a young democracy yet voiced enthusiasm for voting. Checks after the ballot revealed they actually did vote. In this article, the authors argue that this unlikely constellation is explained by participants' emotional appraisals of mediated campaign messages about a polarizing presidential candidate. Grounded in an individual's class position, emotional appraisal of this candidate generated fear in wealthy participants and hope in poorer participants. The coping mechanism, or "secondary assessment" of the candidate, was the firm decision to vote. Based on these findings, the authors propose a model of disenchanted voting that integrates research on emotional appraisal and the social construction of emotions with election salience and personal political efficacy. These findings may be of use in economically polarized democracies beyond Mexico. However, the authors question whether long-term polarizing political discourse is a viable antidote to disenchantment with the uneven economic and social justice outcomes of Latin American democracy.

**Keywords:** *emotions and voting; emotional appraisal; mediated campaigning; voter turnout; Mexico*

An initially perplexing phenomenon appeared in the 2006 Mexican presidential election, what we call the disenchanted voter. Mexicans who took part in three waves of focus groups held across the six-month campaign expressed intense dissatisfaction with politics, politicians, and governance. Yet these same participants at the end of the campaign stated just as emphatically that they would vote in the election. Checks after the ballot found that they actually did. Why would the politically disenchanted vote? Though they became increasingly involved with the campaign, their disaffection with politics and politicians did not change.

In the study, we identify, map, and model steps in the decision-making process that lead participants expressing extreme dissatisfaction with politics nevertheless to turn out to vote. We speak not to the aggregate national level of voter turnout in Mexico but to the micro-level decision-making process about whether or not to participate. We found that emotionally infused interpretations of campaign messages mobilized disenchanted citizens who made emotional attachments to candidates, interpreted the election as personally salient, and had a sense of personal political efficacy. More specifically, participants expressed sufficient levels of trust in the electoral authorities, perceived issue differences among the candidates that would affect their lives in important ways, and perceived a close electoral contest in which each vote could matter. Their appraisal of the candidate and the electoral context produced emotions that mobilized action.

Our findings address two common conditions in contemporary Latin America, class polarization and dissatisfaction with the outcomes of electoral democracy. We find that participants' social positions mediated appraisal of a particular candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who promised to change power relations among classes in Mexico. Class-based appraisals of the candidate produced emotional "upheavals" in our participants that were sufficiently intense to overwhelm impulses to shun voting but qualitatively differentiated by their assessments of his impact on their personal well-being.<sup>1</sup>

Our findings are based on a moderate version of cognitive appraisal theory, which, without denying that emotions such as fear can be a biologically programmed response to a threatening stimuli, asserts that cognitive appraisal of the stimuli and the environment is part of the process that produces the emotion (the primary appraisal) and shapes the coping response made to the stimuli (secondary appraisal) (Johnson-Laird and Oatley 2000: 459; Lazarus et al. 1980: 193–94). Hope, in particular, has been found to be an emotion that requires cognitive processing because full information is lacking. Fear also needs cognitive feedback to be processed but, perhaps because of evolutionary processes, is more easily provoked (Just et al. 2007).

Participants' coping response to fear of the possibility of a populist policy shift was fight rather than flight. Fear prompted participants to appraise their ability to stop the threat by voting and then act in response. Similarly, participants who attached hope to the populist candidate appraised their ability to help him obtain power electorally and also acted in response. For both groups, emotional appraisal of the candidate overwhelmed disenchantment with democracy.

Our findings are important theoretically for the study of emotions, politics, and voter turnout. They help us understand the influence of emotions on turnout, showing that voters can decide whether to turn out based on emotionally driven assessments that are embedded in their positions within social hierarchies, including class. Furthermore, they extend the "stakes-based" explanation of voter turnout in new democracies proposed in Pacek et al. (2005a, 2005b), suggesting that emotional attachments to candidates perceived as viable and offering personally important prospects for change can overcome disenchantment.

A person's position in a social hierarchy influences the type and effects of the emotions he or she experience. Considerable empirical research supports the idea that emotions respond to perceptions of the possible outcomes of social relations, whether "real, anticipated, imagined, or recollected" (Kemper 2000: 46; Kemper 1978). Kemper (2000) argues that the power to force the action of the other (or others) in the relationship is what differentiates participants and stimulates fear, anger, hope, or guilt. Kemper and Barbalet believe these dynamics apply to one-on-one and group relations, including relations between social classes. Barbalet (1998: 4) argues that emotion inheres "simultaneously in individual experience and in the social structures and relationships in which individuals are embedded."

We extend this research to the electoral sphere. Emotional appraisals of a political candidate responded to the participant's assessment of the implications of real or potential changes in personal and group power should this candidate win. In our focus groups, the wealthy feared López Obrador would diminish their economic power and status, expressing concerns in terms of economic crises and social chaos. Poorer participants expressed hope the candidate would improve their material conditions and give them "dignity" in wider social relations. These emotions provided the emotional "upheaval" necessary to propel decision making (Nussbaum 2001), spurring participants to vote.

We conceptualize disenchantment with democracy as a process of demythification, or the gradual dawning of a greater pessimism about what democratization may bring. Disenchantment, however, is not the same as losing hope for a good, or a better, future. Nor does disenchantment necessarily mean demobilization. Our participants both were disenchanted with politics and became highly mobilized to vote.

Understanding micro-level processes effecting voter turnout is important to the practice of democracy. Voter abstention can undermine government legitimacy and increase the likelihood that the disaffected will turn to nondemocratic forms of political action and suggests that levels of representation are unequal since abstention is usually higher in marginalized groups (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Lijphart 1997: 1; Teixeira 1992: 3). Numerous studies offer an explanation for the fact that both voter abstention and citizen dissatisfaction with politics are increasing worldwide (Franklin 2002; Kostadinova and Power 2007; Pacek et al. 2005a, 2005b; Patterson 2000; Teixeira 1992: 24–57). Our study offers one explanation for why increasing abstention and disenchantment with democracy are not necessarily related. Hope that things could get better, or fear that they may get worse, drove even disenchanted citizens to vote.

## **Voter Turnout in New Democracies**

Many of the world's newer democracies came about as the result of protracted civil struggles that involved a groundswell of popular participation (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Yet, by most accounts, voters in third wave democracies turn away from the ballot box in greater numbers after a democratic regime is founded. Explanations have been summed up in two approaches that are not altogether incompatible.

According to the “stakes-based approach,” citizens perceive elections as less important once a democracy has replaced an authoritarian system. The approach is based on turnout studies around the world that find that a citizen will vote when he or she perceives the importance of what is at stake in an election and that his or her vote and those of others like him or her can make a difference (Downs 1957; Evans 2004: 169; Franklin 2002; Grofman et al. 1998; Pacek et al. 2005a; Pacek et al. 2005b: 3). According to this approach, a voter’s perception of his or her ability to influence important policy decisions in an election ultimately drives turnout. The level of competitiveness of the election, whether the office contested is powerful enough to affect policy, the perceived importance of issues, and the perceived space in candidates’ issue positions matter for the turnout decision.

The perceived importance of an election might be the reason for the swell in participation that usually occurs during “founding” democratic elections, signaling a substantial, if usually incomplete, break with an authoritarian regime (Fornos et al. 2004; O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). What is at stake in a founding election is regime change, a single issue pursued urgently by many common citizens and elites, often for years by a group that shares a common oppositional identity. Turnout after the founding election then declines because the central issue of national political life has been decided.

According to the popular “disenchantment” hypothesis, negative assessments of the results of democratic politics lead to low turnout. The disenchantment hypothesis offers an alternative interpretation for abstention and the downward trend following founding elections that turns attention to the demobilizing effect of negative affect. In its earliest iteration, O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) hypothesized that citizens in young democracies would turn away from electoral participation because of waning excitement with the realization that electoral democracy is not a cure-all for concrete problems and, in later extensions, the perception that corruption, inequality, and economic hardship are on the rise (Dalton 2000: 930; Hutcheson 2004; Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Mason 2004; Mattes 2007: 23; Smith 2005: 192). In a nutshell, the disenchantment hypothesis states that negative affect pervades citizen assessments of politics after democracy is established, causing them to turn away from participation.

Our study shows that the problem with the disenchantment hypothesis is that disenchantment with democratic outcomes does not necessarily mean voters—or, at least, not all types of voters in terms of social class—give up on the democratic system. To understand why the disenchantment hypothesis did not work with our Mexican focus groups, our participants led us to probe the influence of emotions and media campaigns.

## **Media Campaigns, Emotions, and Voter Mobilization**

The impact of emotional attachment to candidates is just beginning to be understood. One line of influential research posits that “affective intelligence” operates

within two separate systems for processing information and determining a behavioral response. The “dispositional” system monitors habits or scripts during nonthreatening situations, and the “surveillance” system promotes attention and learning when something unexpected or threatening is perceived (Marcus et al. 2000; Marcus and Mackuen 1993; Neuman et al. 2007: 3). Extending this model, fear interrupts the automatic information-processing scripts found in nonthreatening political contexts to prompt voters to increase their surveillance of the political scene once a threatening candidate is sensed. Whether surveillance leads to voter turnout is not specifically addressed, but Rudolph et al. (2000: 1189) argue that whether anxiety about a candidate mobilizes or demobilizes participation is conditioned partly by “individuals’ perceived ability to successfully undertake political action.”

While the theory of affective intelligence suggests that fear of a candidate is more likely to activate participation than enthusiasm, “appraisal theory” suggests that either emotion could mobilize political behavior because both require cognitive processing that could spur the decision to act. Appraisal theory argues that every emotion is the result of an evaluation—conscious or preconscious—of the personal impact of a situation or environmental stimulus (Lazarus 1991). Kemper (1978, 2000) and Barbalet (1998) extend the theory by arguing that an individual’s position within a social hierarchy effects emotional appraisal (also see Harré 1986). Through macro-historical analysis, Barbalet argues that fear mobilizes elites to act to “contain” class-based clamors for resources, especially from labor. Just et al. (2007) argue that fear and hope both require cognitive processing and may mobilize action because both respond to uncertainty. In elections, both hope and fear stem from individuals’ uncertainty about how a candidate’s future behavior will effect them personally. Over time, emotions become “critically attached” to candidates and lead voters to biased information searches and interpretation to support their previously formed appraisals.

Our case study supports extensions of appraisal theory, showing that emotions can mobilize voting in institutional and cultural contexts far different from those of the consolidated, economically developed democracies in which the theory was formed. Hope and fear were the preliminary outcomes of evaluations of how a candidate’s future behavior might affect participants as individuals and members of a particular social class. Further assessment produced a coping mechanism—voting.

## Method

We analyze micro-level decision making about whether to participate in the 2006 Mexican presidential election. Our research questions are the following: (1) Why did participants vote when dissatisfaction and distrust of politicians and politics were so high? (2) How did mediated political information influence the decision whether or not to vote?

The apparent contradiction—according to the disenchantment hypothesis—of coexisting strong expressions of dissatisfaction with politics and the decision to vote emerged across two waves of focus groups conducted in the first and fourth months of the six-month presidential campaign. For the last wave, a few days before Election Day, we added questions to our discussion guide to model the voter turnout decision process. Our method is in line with Creswell's (2007) definition of the empirical branch of qualitative research, which highlights the emergence of research questions as field studies develop. We applied a qualitative methodology to understand how campaign messages were interpreted because this method enabled us to explore the construction and negotiation of meaning (Merton et al. 1956; Morgan and Krueger 1998).

For recruiting participants in our focus groups, we used the difference between breaking characteristics that differentiate groups and control characteristics that are common to all groups (Knodel 1993: 37–40). Our breaking characteristic was class, defined as a household income of less than 5,000 Mexican pesos (about US\$500) or more than 30,000 Mexican pesos (about US\$3,000) per month. This blunt indicator overlapped with education levels, which were either elementary school, at most, for the lower income groups or more than college enrollment for the higher income groups. Occupational divisions also distinguished the two sets of groups. Using Portes and Hoffman's (2003) occupational schema, our participants were either the children of members of the "dominant" classes (employers, executive managers, and professionals) or members of segments of the subordinate classes that they label the "manual formal proletariat" and the "informal proletariat." These subclasses consist of contractual and noncontractual wage workers, both skilled and unskilled.

Our participants were not the poorest of the poor, who are usually found in rural Mexico. Using the common five-rung socioeconomic ladder, with A being the highest income and E the lowest, participants came from the A and D segments. In this text, we usually refer to our focus group sets by their relative class status or income level.

We also used two control characteristics, meaning that these characteristics were common to all groups: age and urban status. All of our participants fell between eighteen and thirty-three years old, and all were born and living in Mexico City. We focused on younger people because voter abstention was higher within this age group in the 2003 election, there is a common fear in Mexico that youths are alienated from politics (Evans 2004; Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud 2006), and the average age in Mexico is twenty-two (INEGI 2006). Residence in the same city controlled somewhat for access to campaign information. Moderators took care not to allow any group member—male or female—to dominate the conversation. There were eighteen male participants and thirteen female participants in the first two rounds. There were eight men and nine women in the last round, which included substitutions for dropouts. When divided by the number of participants, the participation ratio was 1 word spoken by women to every 1.1 words spoken by men.

Participants were recruited in a snowball sample of private university students and young professionals and university area workers, including contract service workers and noncontract domestic workers. Students of communication and political science were excluded. A filter was given to candidates in which they had to answer questions about age, education level, income range, birthplace, daily time devoted to TV, the kinds of media they used to obtain information about politics, if they voted in 2000 and 2003, and whether they were thinking of voting in the 2006 elections. From the answers, we selected our participants. The composition of the study became two lower income and three higher income groups. The five groups met once in January as the campaigns started and again in late April 2006. Substitutions for dropouts were made in the third round, held in late June 2006, just two days before the election. One June group met with exactly the same participants, a second group had three of the same participants and two new ones, and a third group had all new participants. All new participants were recruited using the original methodology. Rounds coincided with the early, middle, and late points of the campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Discussions were recorded and transcribed by native Spanish speakers. A moderator using a flexible script of open-ended questions asked participants' views of politics, politicians, and television. The last question in rounds 1 and 2 asked whether they intended to vote. The last round included follow-ups that explored why they intended to vote. The questions were written in Spanish by the authors. One author is a native Mexican Spanish speaker, and the other is a native English speaker. The discussion guide and filter were pretested with two groups of college students. For analyzing the data from the group transcripts, the second author hand coded the data according to the grounded theory method because it aims to extract meaning from data collected through qualitative field research (Creswell 2007; Glasser 1992; Glasser and Strauss 1967; Goulding 2002; Jones et al. 2004; Strauss and Corbin 1997). The first author conducted an independent analysis of the transcripts using a grounded theory approach and NVivo software for transcription and qualitative analysis, producing similar results. Such independent cross-checking is an important step in verification of interpretations (Creswell 2007).

## The Context

Our focus groups occurred in a particular political and geographic context, which they seemed to reflect. According to quantitative surveys in Mexico City before and after the election, the main characteristics were the coexistence of disenchantment with voter turnout across all economic groups, a marked degree of polarization in the vote choice of richer and poorer citizens, and intense media campaigns that featured attacks that often invoked underlying class tension (ENCUP 2003, 2005; Lawson et al. 2007).

During seventy-one years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in its various forms, PRI candidates bridged wide regional, ethnic, and class differences by appealing to *mexicanismo*, or a unified nation of mestizos. At its height, the statist program of stabilizing development probably ameliorated some of the worst of these gaps in urban areas, but inequality grew over the past two decades of neoliberal economic adjustment. If we consider the twenty richest individuals in Mexico, their per capita income is equivalent to fourteen thousand times the per capita income of the rest of the population (Guerrero et al. 2006). Mexico is considered one of the countries with the worst income distribution (Corbacho and Schwartz 2002; World Bank 2007).

Inequality becomes more shocking when considering the number of Mexicans living in poverty. According to the National Council for Evaluating Social Policy, 42.6 percent of Mexicans (44.7 million) live in conditions labeled “patrimonial poverty,” an income level that does not cover basic needs. Of those, 14.4 million cannot afford sufficient food (CONEVAL 2007).

Once it gained control of the federal executive branch, the conservative National Action Party (PAN) government discourse continued to stress the unity of Mexicans and made no reference to prevalent inequalities. The PAN did focus on one of the outcomes of inequality, poverty, but treated it in strict technical terms without discussing its political and social causes. Even after an electoral alternation in power, inequality remained seldom broached in political discourse.

The definitional power to block inequality from a central place in public consciousness was broken by Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador when he used this slogan to define his government: “*Por el bien de todos, primero los pobres*” (for the welfare of all, first must come the poor). He initiated programs for the poor and other marginalized groups, including the elderly, single-parent families, physically handicapped people (also disproportionately poorer), and homosexuals. Elites in the mass media strongly criticized some of these programs as irresponsible populism that indebted the city without creating productive employment, but the strategy was very popular with the electorate. After PAN’s dismal performance in the midterm congressional elections of 2003, López Obrador became a serious contender for the presidency in 2006.

Many believe López Obrador’s opponents turned to politics by other means to sap his popularity, strategically leaking information about corruption in his government to television networks willing to air the visual denunciations both to increase ratings and to help bring down a politician who might challenge their duo-monopoly status. Two videos shown on national TV in March 2004 presented collaborators of López Obrador in situations that suggested corruption. In one, his secretary of finance, Gustavo Ponce, was gambling in a VIP zone of a Las Vegas casino. Ponce appeared to be a frequent visitor, and the amount of money he spent could not have come from his salary as a public official. In the second video, López Obrador’s former Secretary of Government and sitting local assemblyman for the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), Rene Bejarano, received a large sum of cash from a businessman who

had received numerous Mexico City construction contracts. The money, allegedly, illegally financed López Obrador's PRD.

Although the main actors of the "videoscandals" ended up in jail, briefly, López Obrador accused his political enemies—the rich, the federal government, and former President Carlos Salinas—of trying "to destabilize" his government.<sup>3</sup> To reinforce the idea of a plot, Mexico City's government financed the publication of a comic series, titled *Historias de la Ciudad* ("Stories from the City"), which was freely distributed in public places frequented by lower income Mexicans. Comic strips are one way city officials have reached out to Mexicans with lower levels of formal education. In the comic, López Obrador was presented as a defender of the interests of the people and explained that his defense of the people was precisely the reason for his persecution by the rich and powerful—who were depicted as abusive and corrupt beneficiaries of an unfair status quo.

One of the series—number 3—titled *Las fuerzas oscuras contra Andrés Manuel López Obrador* ("The Dark Forces against Andrés Manuel López Obrador"), explained that López Obrador's enemies—depicted as ambitious monsters—feared he would become the next president because his social programs would be extended to the whole country (2–4). Thus, for López Obrador's sympathizers, his critics were supporting a plot to keep him from reaching the presidency and reorienting government to favor the poor.

López Obrador's version of events seemed to come true in August 2004, when the federal Attorney General's Office presented a formal accusation against him for allegedly failing to comply with a lower court's order to stop public works on an access road on a private parcel of land. The accusation seemed minor but carried big consequences. If he were to come under formal prosecution, López Obrador would not have been able to run as a candidate for president in 2006. To be formally prosecuted, the federal congress would first have to remove the mayor from office.

López Obrador responded that the accusation was politically motivated, and the majority of Mexicans seemed to believe him. The federal attorney general responded that the case was not political but part of a judicial process and that his office was unable to stop the legal procedure.<sup>4</sup> Opinion surveys found that a growing number of people disagreed with the impeachment process. Moreover, on the eve of the impeachment hearing, the Marketing and Opinion Institute presented a survey showing that López Obrador's popularity was rising. If elections were to be held then, he would obtain well more than any other possible candidate.<sup>5</sup> Since the survey was conducted by phone, out of reach for the poor, López Obrador's popularity was high even with middle-income voters. Nevertheless, congressional representatives from PAN, PRI, and the Mexican Green Party voted 360 in favor of impeachment to 127 votes against from PRD and two smaller parties.

López Obrador was allowed to give a speech in his defense that day. In the speech, broadcast nationally, he defined the accusations as not only against him but also against the country's poor. He said the charge was instigated by the rich and the powerful and that the president and the head of the Supreme Court were following

instructions. As he spoke, and for weeks afterward, massive concentrations of people gathered at Mexico City's main square to demand a reversal of the decision, eventually shaking the financial markets.<sup>6</sup>

The massive demonstrations convinced the president's office to intervene. On April 27, 2005, the president's spokesperson announced that President Vicente Fox was studying the possibility of a "political solution" to the situation. A few hours later, the attorney general resigned, and in the evening Fox told a national TV audience his government would never impede anyone from competing for any elected post and thus his government would retire the accusation. The president's action solution supported López Obrador's description of the affair being driven by dirty politics. The formal presidential campaign started in January 2006, six months before Election Day, July 2. For the first three months, López Obrador remained well ahead in opinion polls. Perhaps because of this advantage, the candidate started to show overconfidence, publicly declining invitations to meet with important business and financial groups, and he even let himself lose his temper in some speeches.

One outburst was immediately exploited by PAN, which used it in a negative advertising campaign the last week of March that portrayed López Obrador as an intolerant, populist politician. The ads ended with a voice off camera that said, "López Obrador is a danger for Mexico." The negative ads and his decision not to participate in the first of two candidate debates on April 25 cost López Obrador some percentage points in the polls. After months ahead, by May he placed second in all independent polls.

In May, two more negative ads appeared, but this time they were paid by Consejo Coordinador Empresarial, a group of Mexico's wealthiest businessmen. In the ads, a voice off camera referred to economic policy changes López Obrador proposed, including an increase in cash subsidies to the poorest Mexicans. With eerie music and a focus on a young middle-class father, a voice referred to previous economic crises: "To bet for something different is to go backward. We must defend what we have obtained." Some other organizations followed suit.

López Obrador had become the lightning rod of the media campaign. In all, there were six ads on the top two commercial networks focusing on Calderón and thirty focusing on López Obrador. In terms of time, ads for López Obrador totaled 381 seconds, those against López Obrador totaled 358 seconds, those for Calderón totaled 45 seconds, and those against Calderón totaled 130 seconds.

Surveys declared a technical tie going into Election Day. The final result put the PRD candidate less than 1 percentage point behind his main rival from the PAN, now President Felipe Calderón.

## Findings

In this section, we present findings from our focus groups discussions and the model of voter turnout decision making that resulted from our analysis. Each of the

five groups was separately analyzed through a theoretical coding method (Goulding 2002). For example, open codes included “attacks,” “unfulfilled promises,” and “corruption” when talking about politics and “sensationalist” and “deceitful” when discussing televised political information. Based on the open codes, the coder used a constant comparison method to construct a coding matrix that helped to identify patterns across the focus groups and the three waves of groups (Glasser 1992).

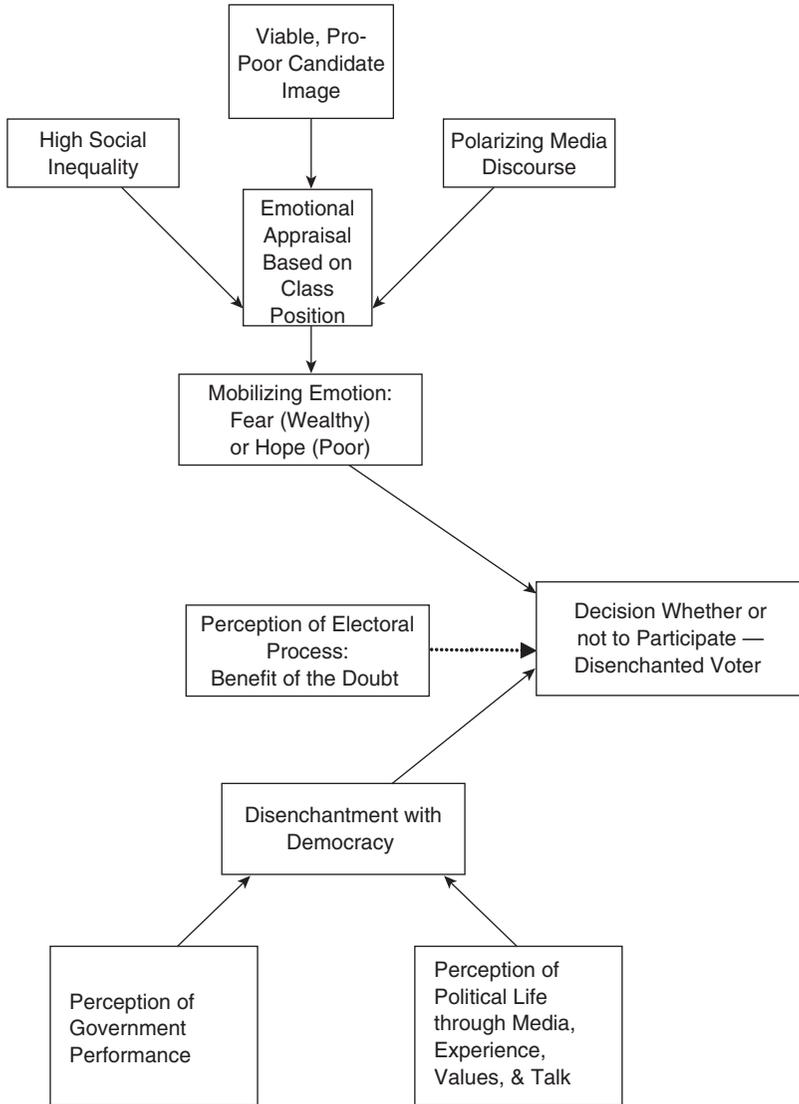
The cross-group, cross-round comparisons yielded patterns that built incipient categories, or subcategories. Only properties that appeared repeatedly were used in the construction of subcategories. The coder then merged the subcategories to create a central category, which has the function of integrating and strengthening the developing theory (Jones et al. 2004: 50; Strauss and Corbin 1997). We called the central category the Perception of Turnout. The relationships between the subcategories and the central category are depicted in a grounded theoretical model.

High- and low-income participants had similar negative perceptions of the quality of mediated political information, politicians, and government performance. Perceptions of elections produced expressions of confidence in the upper-income groups. Lower income participants were wary of electoral authorities but also willing to give the process a chance. However, if class was not a great differentiator for opinions and attitudes in relation to politics and the campaign in general (the first two subcategories), the greatest contrast between class groups emerged when discussing one of the candidates, López Obrador (the third subcategory). The low-income participants thought he lived humbly and had done good work as mayor. High-income participants perceived him as someone who manipulated the poor and would indebt the country. López Obrador also stimulated verbalizations of strong emotional responses that were qualitatively different for both classes of participants but strongly mobilizing for both. Perceptions of the other candidates never produced reactions as strong. Thus, in these voters, class-based emotional reactions overcame disenchantment and prompted the decision to vote. Figure 1 depicts that process. Following is the evidence on which we based the model.

### **I. Subcategory 1: Perception of Political Life through Television, Mass Media, and Political Talk**

This subcategory was created by analyzing participants’ perceptions of politics, politicians, and media as a source of political information. With respect to politics and politicians, we found that participants distinguished between a *real* politics, which was corrupt and oriented toward politicians’ personal enrichment, and an *ideal* politics, which aimed to further the common good. In addition, we found that participants blamed politicians for the perversion of ideal politics. These interpretations permeated all groups and rounds. These feelings did not change across the campaigns, and when directly asked about the possible effect of the campaigns, participants indicated an intensification of negative attitudes.

**Figure 1**  
**Grounded Theory Model of Disenchanted Voting**



As for television and other media, we found that whether or not participants viewed television a great deal, it was a source of reference for them and was understood as the medium where candidates targeted much of their advertising and image-making focus.

Both high- and low-volume users of television were wary of television news as a source of political information, identifying corporate, commercial, and partisan reasons for the distortion of political information in newscasts. When considered important, they sought to verify information with a variety of media and nonmedia sources and interpreted mediated information through political talk with family and peers such as coworkers or classmates. Political advertisements were seen as full of attacks, deception, and self-serving claims. Ultimately, participants accepted mediated information that reinforced preheld views of politics and politicians but dismissed as not credible (and resulting from previously identified sources of bias) information that did not reinforce these views. Over time, selective perception seemed to strengthen our participants' beliefs.

We believe that Mexican audiences behaved much as those in studies in more consolidated and economically developed democracies exploring the selective reception of information, low-credibility media sources, and contextualized interpretation of mediated information. Selective acceptance of information, comparison of contrasting information with previous experiences, values and stores of knowledge, and elaboration and sense making through political talk with peers created an effect we liken to a resonance chamber that strengthened dominant feelings about politics over time as long as the underlying conditions creating the attitudes remained unchanged. We pull together these strings of findings and propose a Resonance Chamber Effect in which audiences accept information from low-credibility media sources only when it strengthens preheld notions of, and feelings about, politics. Further elaborated in Guerrero Martinez and Hughes (2007), this finding has similarities to Just et al.'s (2007: 237-39) consistency hypothesis in which emotional attachments to candidates, once made, screen out other information through biased information searches or selective interpretations. Our work suggests that selective perception of information crosses institutional and cultural settings.

*A. Views of politics.* This refers to participants' general views of politics solicited with the following questions: (1) How do you think Mexicans view politics? (*¿Cómo creen que los mexicanos ven la política?*) and (2) Why do they have these views of politics? (*¿Por qué creen que se tiene esta visión de la política?*).

Low income (January round): Montiel, he was governor and on television we saw that now he has many big houses and mansions in Spain and Paris and I don't know where else. They show the picture this big of his house, when in his speeches he said that he would benefit the poor and help his region. And then one realizes that he was not benefiting anyone but himself. Politics is OK, but politicians, as the lady said [referring to another participant], deviate it from its goals.<sup>7</sup>

High income (April round): Politics is a synonym of corruption. Politics, as we have here, doesn't work at all.

*B. Views of politicians.* This refers to the image participants have of politicians, ascertained through responses to the question, what do you think is people's opinion

of politicians? (*¿Cuál creen que es la opinión de la gente sobre los políticos?*). Participants' responses coincided, agreeing that politicians are responsible for hijacking the "ideal good politics" and for transforming it into a realm of dispute for furthering their personal interests.

Low income (January round): I really do not trust politicians. Because of many past experiences and things that have happened in this country, we do not believe what they say. . . . "We're going to do this and that," they say, but they only want power and forget about their own promises.

Low income (April round): I do think that the majority of the people have the worst opinion of all politicians because of all the things that we have seen and that have happened.

High income (April round): Well, I think that actually corruption is associated with politicians.

*C. Perception of TV and mass media as a source of political information.* This component is drawn from responses to the following questions: (1) How would you evaluate information about politics presented on TV? (*¿Cómo calificarían la información que presenta la televisión sobre la política?*), (2) How do you believe TV has behaved during the present political campaign? (*¿Cómo creen que ha actuado la televisión en esta campaña?*), and (3) Do you consider TV a credible source of information? (*¿Ustedes creen que la televisión es un medio confiable?*).

Respondents' verbalizations connected TV news content to hidden commercial or political interests.

High income (January round): Obviously I think that the media are moved by money and one form to get it is by selling, by presenting sensational stories that grab people's attention. Scandals sell very well, and scandals draw ratings. That means money.

Low income (April round): Television does not say the truth in politics. Thus, one remains always partially informed. They even present stories that later turn out to be false. They do it for business.

High education (April round): In both TV Azteca and Televisa the information is guided by their own interests. I don't know, but I think that they share the same interests as the parties. Then, obviously, the information they show is guided by the same ideas [as the parties] and runs along the same lines. They won't say anything else.

Opinions about televised political information were intertwined with the images participants held about politics generally.

Low income (January round): Well, no, it is not [trustworthy]. There are many, many things that they don't show in the news broadcasts. It masks many things, and because it is full of politics, it is pure politics.

High income (January round): I think that [TV] is a very manipulative media and that it shows only the information that is expedient for it to show. . . . Now that the PRD candidate [López Obrador] has a daily show on TV Azteca, my question is how truthful can

the information TV Azteca presents be? Or when I see [Televisa's anchorman Joaquín López Dóriga interviewing all of the candidates but coinciding ideologically with [conservative presidential candidate] Felipe Calderón, I ask myself what's going on.

Low education (April round): I feel that politicians spend a lot of money on TV, and at the end they do very little. It is just a matter of power; they fight for power among themselves and it ends always the same way.

Feelings about political advertisements came up in response to other questions about the general impressions of the mediated campaign and how participants compared the 2006 campaign to campaigns in previous years. Respondents at both income levels reacted negatively and strongly to the attacks as manipulative and overly expensive

High income (June round): To me it's terrible that the candidates' positions are not "this is what I am going to do" but "look how bad López Obrador [Mexico City mayoral candidate] is."

High income (June round): I also feel disenchanted because instead of using the time to say their proposals, what they are going to try to do, or how they are going to try to do it, they just throw pot shots at each other. And the ads they put on TV are disgusting.

Low income (June round): Participant 1: I once walked by a PAN campaign event in the Zócalo (main square) and stopped to see what was up. A TV camera and interviewer were there and asked if the PAN carted me in to the event. I said, "No, I was walking by."

Low income (June round): Participant 2: That happens all of the time. Just look at the people in the TV ads. If you are observant, and you look in the faces of the people from the countryside who are around the candidates, you can see that they are bored to death.

Low income (June round): Participant 1: There were people there that, when the candidate was talking, they went crazy over him. And then you looked around to see what was happening with the others, at what moment they were going to raise their hands so they would take their pictures. There were ladies there eating a grapefruit like, saying, "This guy is nuts," eating the sandwich the organizers gave them, and [the organizers] wouldn't give any to me.

Low income (June round): Participant 3: It's because you told them you weren't carted in.

Participants filtered televised information through information from other mass media, their own experiences and values, and political discussion with peers during work, in class, or at home.

High income (April round): What I have read, seen, the truth is I don't let this information guide me. I watch TV and the news stories go by so rapidly. If I really want to know what's going on, I go and cross-check televised information on the Internet. You cannot completely trust TV information alone.

Low income (April round): Sometimes at home we talk about what is going on. "You see what is going on, the problem that just happened in San Mateo Atenco?" [everyone in the group agrees] "Ah. . . ." Who knows what will happen. We talk a lot at work, that what the media said wasn't true, that the [people who started the confrontation with police] were brought in from the outside for political purposes.

Televised political information is regarded as a space to promote personal, partisan, and corporate interests instead of reliable information on important proposals to resolve collective problems. Other media are somewhat more credible and can be used to cross-check TV. All mediated information is filtered through experiences, values, and interpersonal political talk with family and peers. Information that fits preheld attitudes is accepted, while other information is discarded unless it is corroborated. In this way, television tends to strengthen dominant political attitudes, which in 2006 was disenchantment.

High income (June round): Yes, it changed me. The campaigns were so negative that my image of politicians in general became more negative. They are so accusatory that. . . . They are all just the same.

Low income (June round): No, in this case, no [my opinion] is just the same. The politicians continue to be unscrupulous.

## II. Subcategory 2: Perceptions of Election

Participants expressed doubts about elections in two realms. First, the lower income groups were less certain than the higher income groups about whether electoral results would be respected, although they seemed to give the electoral authorities the benefit of the doubt. Second, both lower and higher income groups believed that the advent of democratic elections in Mexico had not produced a political system that fulfilled the basic requirements of the *ideal* politics—a system of making decisions and deciding disputes that improves the public welfare. In other words, they harbored doubts about the efficacy of elections both because of lingering doubts about electoral fraud and because of poor governmental performance.

Low income (June round): Even though they announce that vote counting is transparent, you are not going to be watching or observing in the moment that someone corrupt is going to slip some votes in. And it's true, like the political parties' ads, they promise and they proclaim, but one candidate could be just like the other. It could be that way in the IFE [electoral authority].

High income (June round): They tell you what you want to hear. I don't believe in political campaigns. I only feel that they tell you something to see if, like gum, it sticks. But I don't believe they will really come through with even half of what they say.

## III. Subcategory 3: Perceptions of Candidates

The perception of particular candidates was the only coding category where our breaking characteristic—class—revealed strongly different interpretations of political reality. The driving force of this difference was the candidacy of López Obrador. Both lower and higher income groups generally agreed that the PRI's candidate, Roberto Madrazo, was not a factor in the election. Calderón for the high-income

groups was the least bad option rather than a candidate who generated enthusiasm. Moreover, both sets of groups were very aware of candidates' campaign messages, which they both characterized as low-credibility attacks. Nevertheless, they reacted very strongly to the messages.

The lower class groups thought López Obrador had produced good results as the mayor of Mexico City and had lived a humble lifestyle. While they could not completely overcome their doubts given politicians' past broken promises, the attacks against López Obrador reassured them he was a propoor candidate and on their side. They were wary but willing to suspend their disbelief. They displayed a muted response of hope to López Obrador as the president who would, for the first time in their lives, make it easier for the poor to "get ahead" and live a "dignified" life.

Low income (June round): I think the only thing that can guide us now is hope for a real change. A real change, not a demagogic change and promising us everything we ache for. We all, all of us, have real needs, at different levels, but we all have them. So, I think that what will guide all of us as a people is a hope, a hope that they make it a little easier to get ahead.

Low income (June round): You wonder the same about López Obrador [whether he will break his promises like the other politicians], but you have no idea how popular he is because of his lifestyle, because he is not so denigrating like the other two candidates. He is a good person, well maybe I am wrong, but as a person, you see he lives humbly.

Low income (June round): It's really hard to get ahead, it is hard to get enough to eat. We are privileged in having a job. There are people who really suffer to be able to eat, which is a basic necessity. So now looking at any of those who govern, I think what guides anyone to vote for a president is hope. It is nothing more than hope because we know that really they are not going to cover our needs, even though we give our maximum effort. So I think that now the only thing that guides us is hope for a real change, not a change that is just demagoguery that promises us what we all desire. That is López Obrador.

The upper class groups, however, believed López Obrador was a populist manipulator who had indebted the city and would divide and ruin the country. They blamed his popularity on the easy manipulation of the poor, who either lacked "access to information" or, for some, were lazy and looked to the candidate to give them hand-outs and an easy life. Their negative reaction to López Obrador was strong and unambiguous, and they directly tied their emotions to his candidacy. Emotions explicitly expressed about his candidacy in the last round of groups included "hate," "indignation," and "fear." In fact, with one exception criticizing dirtying campaign, all other utterances mentioning López Obrador's candidacy during the last round of groups included an expression of a negative emotion. These comments were much more directly aimed at López Obrador than the expressions of hope from the poor, who tended to be more wary and doubtful that for them a better day was coming.

High income (June round): And you know with your family the conversation is really slanted. In other words, you share the same values and thoughts and political affiliations. Today my mom heard this, my brother that, and me this, like all of us, so all of us go chiming in, and we make this big snowball, and you end up, in my case, hating López Obrador even more.

High income (June round): Ay! Yesterday, for example. I wanted to know who was going to vote for López Obrador, because it makes me very indignant when they say, "We've already won" [a campaign slogan]. So when I went to the pizza place, I asked the waiter, "Tell me, who are you going to vote for?" And so he said, "For López Obrador," and I made such a face that I didn't even want to give him a tip.

High income (June round): The last thing that I heard is that López Obrador is going to be like [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chávez, in other words, almost, almost, like Chávez. Who knows where the country could go?

In summary, all groups had a pessimistic view of political life as perceived through television and the media and may have been doubtful about the effectiveness of elections, and class-based interpretations of mediated campaign messages produced strong and very different reactions to a particular polarizing candidate, López Obrador. What was the effect of these reactions on the decision of whether to vote or to turn away from electoral politics?

### **Central Category: The Decision of Whether or Not to Vote**

The subcategories constitute our central category, the decision of whether or not to participate in the election. Emotional appraisal of the candidate's viability and policy course plays the central role in the model, convincing participants to act despite negative perceptions of political life and government performance. Perceptions of the election authorities' ability to conduct a free and fair election were positive enough to facilitate the decision to vote. The strong emotions produced by class-embedded appraisals of López Obrador's policy course convinced participants not to turn away from the election because of unhappiness with the outcomes of democracy. Fear or hope about the future, as embodied in the López Obrador candidacy, overcame disenchantment.

Here is a verbatim passage from the low-income group in the last round:

Moderator: With so much disenchantment, why do you think that people vote?

P1: Hope, the desire that things change.

P2: Because they really think that something could change, I think.

P1: Out of habit. There are a lot who vote out of habit, because they go with their family even though the older brother doesn't want to go.

P3: No, it is so that things change.

P4: I think it is because they want things to change already, to fulfill an obligation, and because they want something in return. I voted for the first time and I woke up at 6 A.M. because I was so excited. I left at 9 A.M.

Moderator: And you, why do you vote?

P5: Because of hope, because of conviction. A lot is in play. It is a watershed.

P1: Hope, that the government helps us with employment. God willing, the president will keep his promise.

P2: For a change that I have hoped for, for a long time.

P3: For change, but not a partisan change, but for something better.

Moderator: Finally, compared with what you thought of politicians at the beginning of the campaigns, has your opinion of them improved, worsened, or stayed the same?

P4: No, it has stayed the same. Politicians still have no scruples.

P1: It is the same, they are still deceiving the people.

P5: It hasn't changed. From December to today, nothing has changed. I am conscious of what they are, but I know who I will vote for. He may be bad, but I hope for a real change.

Participants in the high income groups also voiced emotional reasons for voting despite disappointment with politics and politicians. The difference is that they would vote out of fear. Overwhelmingly, utterances about voting and López Obrador directly referred to a sense of fear.

High income (June round): My mom, for example, has never voted before, and this year she said, "Yes, I am going to vote," because she is afraid that López Obrador might win.

High income (June round): I think that people vote because before the PRI always won, in other words you didn't have to vote to win, but now people realize that your vote does really count. So we are going to vote because, yes, because we are afraid of what might happen, so that "El Peje" [López Obrador's nickname] doesn't win.

High income (June round): We are talking about voting in my family, at work, in school, like, all over the place. Suddenly, I see a friend I haven't seen in five years, and he says, "*Hijole*, what a scare that Peje might win." "And I don't know what." "And so we have to go vote." "And you have to vote for this guy," etc.

High income (June round): I am really going to vote for Calderón because I don't want El Peje to win. My vote is based on that rather than in the information from Calderon's campaigns.

High income (June round): My mother was just naturalized Mexican. . . . She is Bolivian. . . . She says, "What will happen if Peje wins? Everyone who can must vote, yes, for the good of the country."

High income (June round): Moderator do you all plan to vote?

All in unison: Yes!

## Implications

These findings advance and integrate several lines of research that are usually developed in isolation from one another. The first line is studies of voter turnout. The findings support the stakes-based explanation of voter turnout and dispute the

demobilizing argument of the disenchantment hypothesis. When stakes are high and viable candidates represent different approaches, the upheaval wrought by attaching either negative or positive affect to viable candidates can mobilize even disenfranchised citizens. The emotional attachments our participants made to Andrés Manuel López Obrador crystallized interpretations of media messages and spawned action. However, mention must be made to the fact that such mobilization to vote is not the outcome of civic engagement or of trust in politics but of fear and hope.

Second, the findings address research on emotions in politics in several ways. The first way is by demonstrating how social stratification mediated emotional appraisal of political candidates in a specific context to produce very different types of discrete emotions across the two contrasting groups. This finding supports the social construction approach to appraisal theory and extends it to the decision of whether or not to participate in politics. The second way is by challenging the stronger version of an assumption in neuroscience and some biological approaches in political psychology that fear is a paralyzing emotion or at most increases surveillance because of threat; instead, fear can stimulate the coping mechanism of voting when the possibility of blocking the threat is considered strong. And the third way is by showing that fear and hope when attached to a viable political candidate are powerfully mobilizing emotions that can overcome generalized states of unhappiness or malaise, at least for a period and under specific circumstances. In the broadest sense, these findings show there is no necessary relationship between disenchantment with democracy and participation in democratic elections. The disenchantment hypothesis that voters necessarily turn away from elections because they are unhappy with democratic outcomes may not prove true when considering class in specific contexts. If it is true that the overall turnout decreased from 63.0 percent of voters in the presidential election of 2000 to 58.5 percent in 2006, at least we have some evidence showing that not all social classes reacted the same. Upper and lower sectors felt mobilized to vote.

Finally, though such electoral participation driven by fear and hope may not end up by restituting civic or political trust in politics and democracy, there may be some potentially good news for democracy in Latin America. It gives democratic regimes more time to make good on promises of social justice and economic well-being for a majority of citizens. On the other hand, there may be a temporal dynamic in play; our findings might not replicate election after election if levels of social and economic well-being do not improve. The viability of polarizing political discourse as a long-term antidote to rising levels of voter abstention seems on its face foolhardy. Further class polarization and continued disenchantment with corruption and failed governance may across time spawn antidemocratic and antisocial behavior associated with social breakdown, such as the crime and guerilla outbreaks regularly featured in Mexico's newspapers since July 2006. Our poorer participants suggest that long-term democratic stability requires better outcomes, such as real improvements in their material well-being.

## Notes

1. The need for an emotional “upheaval” in the provocation of action comes from Nussbaum (2001) and is linked to candidate evaluations in Just et al. (2007).
2. Before the 2007 New Electoral Law, political campaigns in Mexico lasted six months, starting in January and ending in June.
3. *La Jornada*, “Ahumada se esfuma. La PGJDF solicita apoyo a la Interpol. El gobierno se deslinda de los videos; es mentira: PRI y PRD” [Ahumada disappears. The PGJDF asks for support from Interpol. The government distances itself from the videos; it is a lie, PRI and PRD], Mar. 5, 2004.
4. *El Universal*, “La PGR, lista para remitir el expediente,” March 30, 2005.
5. *Miami Herald*, “Despite proceedings, Major popularity up,” Apr. 7, 2005.
6. *La Jornada*, “Recomiendan cautela para invertir aquí,” and “Algo empezó ayer en el Zócalo,” Apr. 6–8, 2005.
7. Arturo Montiel was an unsuccessful aspirant to presidential candidacy and the former governor of the state of Mexico.

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