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Discourse of fear: why emotion convinces us more than reason

El discurso del miedo: Por qué nos convence más la emoción que la razón

ABSTRACT:

The discourse of fear consists of communicating risks, assuring us that there is something to fear, with a narrative of control that ensures that we are kept safe through a certain intervention. This mass discourse through networks and mass media has a predominance of emotional content over rational content. Fear is used as a powerful source of persuasion as it makes our vulnerability salient, activates the desire to survive, and increases snap decisions not grounded in careful, central thinking. The objective of this article is to address, from the literature of social psychology, how persuasion through fear works, how it activates heuristics and peripheral routes, and the effects it has on decision-making. From this literature, an example of political messages about a Mexican ruler, its content and its repercussions on the electorate is analyzed. Finally, the way in which people receive information is discussed and the passive role assigned to them is questioned, where they are assumed as mere recipients and not transforming agents. In the same way, the limits of the discourse of fear are discussed.

KEY WORDS:

Fear; decision making; slow thinking; fast thinking; social influence; persuasion.

RESUMEN:

El discurso del miedo consiste en comunicar riesgos asegurándonos que hay algo que temer, con una narrativa de control que asegura mantenernos a salvo a través de cierta intervención. Este discurso masificado a través de las redes y los medios de comunicación masiva tiene una predominancia de contenido emocional por encima del contenido racional. Se recurre al miedo como una fuente poderosa de persuasión en tanto vuelve saliente nuestra vulnerabilidad, activa el deseo de sobrevivir y aumenta las decisiones rápidas no fundamentadas en un pensamiento central y cuidadoso. El objetivo de este artículo consiste en abordar, desde la literatura de la psicología social, cómo funciona la persuasión a través del miedo, de qué forma activa heurísticos y rutas periféricas y sus efectos en la toma de decisiones. Desde esta literatura se analiza un ejemplo de mensajes políticos sobre un gobernante mexicano, su contenido y sus repercusiones en el electorado. Finalmente, se discute la forma en que las personas reciben la información y se cuestiona el papel



pasivo que se les ha asignado, donde se les asume como meros recipientes y no agentes transformadores. De igual forma se discuten los límites del discurso del miedo.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Miedo; toma de decisiones; pensamiento lento; pensamiento rápido; influencia social; persuasión.

1. Introduction

Persuasion is the process by which a message induces a change in beliefs, attitudes or behaviors. In itself, it is neither good nor bad; as Bernays (1923, as cited in Marlin, 2013, p. 9) points out, it is relative, «the only difference between good and bad propaganda, really, is the point of view: the defense of what we believe we call education. The defense of what we do not believe is propaganda. However, beyond subjective judgment, it is possible to define propaganda as an organized attempt from communication to affect beliefs or action in such a way that it does not seek to adequately and rationally inform people» (Marlin, 2013). Persuasion and propaganda are everywhere: in marketing, friends, religion, advertising. Whenever a group interacts, some members will try to convince others of their point of view, be it in a jury that decides the guilt or innocence of a person, the board of directors of a company, legislators and of course, in speeches. from power.

In general, power prefers messages of an emotional nature, as it seeks people to take a position quickly and legitimize their actions. Although positive emotions can also be used to persuade, fear has more pronounced effects as it reminds us of our mortality, igniting our desire to survive and leading us to take cognitive decision shortcuts for preservation. This is where the discourse of fear makes sense.

What characteristics does the speech of fear have? Why is it so effective? In this article we discuss how messages from power, shared through the mass media, are processed by people and what effects they have on behavior. We give an example of how the developed theory allows us to understand a successful discourse of fear and finally, we seek to question the passive role assigned to people, as mere recipients of information instead of active agents.

1.1 THE CULTURE OF FEAR

Fear is a primary emotion, together with joy, anger and pain, which motivates us to avoid a danger that is usually external.¹ It results from the consequence of recognizing the absence of power in a threatening situation (Corsini, 1994). Social fear may not be related to what is happening: the subjective perceptions and emotions of people do not have to correspond with the objective figures.

The perceived probability that something in particular could happen to us (concrete fear) can be different from diffuse fear (the fear we feel), since what is important many times is not what could happen, but what we *believe* could happen to us (Chávez-Váldez & Esparza-

1/ In this last point it differs from anxiety, in that they are unrecognized threats and phobias are irrational obsessions and intense avoidance of specific objects and situations. (Corsini, 1994).



delVillar, 2017). In addition, people's fears may be far from what the media presents as the central message, highlighting other elements and showing that people not only can, but actually have their own fears. For example, in Mexico the list of fears is headed by losing a relative (Hernández-Pozo et al., 2009) while in the United States there are snakes and speaking in public (Brewer, 2001).

For his part and in the same sense, Furedi (2002) mentions that as a society we perceive multiple threats: terrorism, global warming, flu epidemics, weapons of mass destruction, diet and lifestyle. He believes that fear has been politicized to a point where the debate is no longer whether or not we should be scared, but rather what should scare us. It is worth asking if the fear we feel now is different from that of other times. Furedi (2002) warns us that it is impossible to know if we now feel more fear or less, since its meaning changes over time and this makes it impossible to compare the levels of fear: even if we found that the levels are the same, they would have different meanings for people of each era. However, this author proposes that there is something different today compared to other times: more than real risks having increased, the meaning of damage is what has been inflated. At the same time, the term *vulnerable* is used more to describe people, as if they were believed to be more easily hurt now. This causes greater emphasis on emotional fragility and the impotence that individuals have to face adversity.

What has caused an increase in people's fear agenda? Surely one of the answers has to do with digital technology that has reduced and in some cases has eliminated the limits of space and time, which makes it possible to find out what is happening in various parts (Flamarique & D'Oliveira-Martins, 2013). This has meant that experience is no longer the most transcendental, but rather the moment, which can occur through a video, a narration (e.g. a tweet) or a photo. The objective then is not what one lives, but what emotions these experiences provoke, being essential to maximize the amount of emotion experienced.

This allows us to glimpse that even when the media release information, people do not receive it passively. Instead, they look for what excites them and are able to select or discard information that they consider exaggerated or excessive. For example, when faced with apocalyptic information, people may remain immobile or consider that something that is exposed as risky is not really so (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Thus, contrary to what some academics such as Margee Kerr (as cited in Furedi, 2002) consider, the media are not fully responsible for the culture of fear. The media do not dictate what to feel, instead they are a pervasive social institution that provides us with a changing agenda of our fears, selectively directing our attention to certain threats. This has definitely extended the fears of things that we directly experience to those that we no longer see or hear (Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006).

For example, in a study on the fears faced by Mexicans, it was found that the most frequent fears are material loss (e.g., robbery with violence and economic extortion) and damage to the person (e.g., disappearance, kidnapping and sexual assault) (Chávez-Váldez & Esparza-delVillar, 2017). In this sense, people experience fears that come from first-hand experiences or close accounts, which implies that the media have not produced these fears in all people, rather in many cases they have exacerbated them (National Institute of Geography and Statistics [INEGI], 2021).

UA broad fear agenda is not by itself negative, some consider that the agenda offered to us by the media has the prerogative of broadening our horizons and making us more aware of





what is happening in other countries (Lama, 2014), which activism has taken advantage of to cross borders and turn local problems into global causes, turning us into global citizens (Peña, Paredes & Solis, 2019). At the same time, it has the disadvantage that it fills us with emotions in the face of causes that we often cannot solve, since they constitute invisible enemies, such as forced disappearances, where the threat is faceless.

Thus, the media have increased the fear agenda, making it more global and abundant. This has caused a magnification of our emotional experience in the face of external events, which is combined with a pronounced and greater perception of how vulnerable we are. Faced with this reality, the story of politicized fear aims to offer a system to make sense of the world and gives us a series of assumptions that allows us to understand and respond to threats (Furedi, 2002). In other words, a fear-based discourse from politics tells us what to do and how to react to the fear we feel, how to reduce it, and at the same time promises to lessen the threats we face. How do fear messages become so powerful and manage to conquer all attempts at careful and rational thought?

1.2. PROCESSING OF FEAR MESSAGES: CENTRAL OR PERIPHERAL ROUTE?

We can process the information we receive through our central thought, which broadens our understanding, or through fast routes (including emotional shortcuts). When Petty & Cacciopo (1983) reviewed the predominant literature to explain attitude change (a way of approaching persuasion), they found that the authors used different terms to explain it, but that it was possible to include them in two different ways: the way central and peripheral pathway. The central conceives the change of attitudes as a voluntary and careful consideration on the part of the people, where before rejecting or accepting a proposal there is a conscientious balancing of pros and cons. The changes and attitudes that occur through a central route are more durable over time. The peripheral works differently, causing people to make simple inferences based on whether some object is negatively or positively associated with something else. For example, a person might accept a suggestion if it is submitted by someone they like, who is attractive, or who is an expert. It has been assumed that attitudes that change via the peripheral route are temporary and cannot predict behavior. People do not use only the peripheral route or only the central route, but a combination of both, as it is impossible to scrutinize every message we receive on a daily basis (Petty, Cacciopo & Schumann, 1983).

Thus, we need fast lanes to solve our day to day in a victorious way. When we need to make a decision, as simple as choosing clothes or as complex as choosing a partner or deciding who to vote for in an electoral campaign, we can look at the complexity of the world and look for a shortcut that offers us an expedited solution. These fast paths are called heuristics. Heuristics help us solve problems and cannot be explained by logic or probability theory (Groner, Groner & Bischof, 1983). One of the most common heuristics is the affective one, which allows the complexity of a problem to be reduced to its emotional aspects: a decision is then directly affected by liking or disliking (Kahneman, 2012).

Another heuristic that we frequently use is that of availability: we tend to remember certain information more, so we consider it important and interpret the world based on it. In this sense,



the information we receive as a constant bombardment can anchor and bias the availability heuristic. Although heuristics help us solve problems or make decisions quickly, they have the major disadvantage that they do not seek the truth and lead to decision making that is not based on a careful balance of pros and cons or evidence (Kahneman, 2012). Kahneman (2012) has described these pathways and categorized them as fast thinking, in contrast to slow thinking that is logical and careful. Why not use slow thinking all the time? Quick thinking is necessary: it happens because the idea of mental energy is more than a metaphor. The nervous system consumes more glucose than the rest of the body, so when we are faced with a task that requires self-control (e.g. avoiding expressing an emotion or not eating something we want) or cognitive load (e.g. remembering a series of numbers), the glucose level drops, analogous to what happens when a runner exercises. Thus, cognitive resources cannot be used in all tasks as it is expensive, which leads us to only use our rational or slow thinking for tasks that we cannot perform with our fast and automatic thinking (Kahneman, 2012). Slow thinking will then be a valuable resource that we will only use occasionally.

Slow thinking can't solve every problem we face either. What's more, even when we use slow thinking there is a lot of information that we miss. In a paradigm that has already become a classic, Simons and Chabris (1999) asked participants to watch a video where people in black or white shirts were throwing a basketball at each other. The objective was for the participants to count the number of passes given by those in black shirts. Halfway through the video, a person dressed as a gorilla passed through the players. When at the end the participants were asked for the number of passes, they were able to get it right without much problem, but 73% of them did not see the gorilla. This phenomenon has also been observed when a stranger (confederate)² approaches people to ask for an address, and while they are giving the address, the confederate changes to another person. This effect has been called change blindness and shows the limitation in our processing capacity (Simons & Chabris, 1999).

Limited processing power adds to the ease with which we experience cognitive load (reaching the limit of our information processing), as when we have less energy we process through stereotypes. This occurs not only with innocuous stimuli, but also with social stimuli. In one study, the control group was given lemonade with a sugar substitute (no calories), while the experimental group was given lemonade with sugar. Then all the participants were asked to write an essay describing how they imagined the daily life of a homosexual man. Those who had less available energy (the group that consumed sugar-free lemonade) made a more stereotyped description (Gailliot, Peruche, Plant, & Baumeister, 2009). In the same sense, to prove that we can only process a certain amount of information at the same time, the participants have been put to perform tasks that require self-control while memorizing a series of numbers. When participants are busy remembering numbers it is more difficult for them to decide on a healthy lunch (fruit) and they tend to lean towards something that will give them more instant pleasure (chocolate) (Muraven, Tice & Baumeister, 1998).

The previous line of evidence leaves a powerful lesson: people are susceptible to using the cognitive resources that we have available: the more we have, our processing will be more

2/ In social psychology experiments it is common for there to be an accomplice of the experimenters who acts not to appear so. In this case, the Confederate acted as if he was lost and called for help.



central —in the words of Petty & Cacioppo (1983)— or slower —in the terms of Kahneman (2012)— which means that the possibility of processing information with full and critical attention is a capacity that is not lost and that will depend more on the time and energy available. However, it will not be our first option to solve problems, since as Kahneman (2012) warns us, fast thinking will first try to solve a problem, and only if it cannot do so will slow thinking take action. And when it comes to messages with emotional content, such as the speech of fear, they will be more likely to be processed with quick thinking, while it will be perceived that there is little time to respond and resolve, given the sense of urgency that fear imprints on people. decision making.

1.3 THE DISCOURSE OF FEAR AND ITS EFFECTS

Emotions lead to quick and peripheral decision making, especially when conditions are too complex to understand immediately and when there is a lot of social tension. Naomi Klein (2007) points out that this can be seen clearly when there are natural, economic, political or natural disasters, since on the one hand society has a clear need to resolve, while on the other there are actors who seek to abuse this need, making decisions that go beyond solving the disaster. Because it is urgent to act to resolve, society will not carefully review whatever is proposed to it, so it will be a good time to make decisions that at another time they would refuse to support. Naomi Klein (2007) calls this phenomenon the shock doctrine. Of course, the shock can be manufactured, it does not have to occur naturally, it can be created from a discourse of fear: communicating risks assuring us that there is something to fear, with a control narrative that ensures keeping us safe through some intervention (Altheide, 2010).

How is it that fear produces a change in the way we evaluate the world and its risks? We have established before that the peripheral route will be in charge of processing emotional messages, however, fear will cause a cascade of events that will change the way we perceive reality and the risk we are willing to take. The first premise is that a person's state of mind can affect their future prospects. In one study, Wright and Bower (1992) induced mood states in people by asking them to focus on sad or happy events in their lives. Happy people were more optimistic, meaning they reported higher future probabilities of positive events. The opposite pattern was found in sad people.

Being negatively excited is related to making less risky (more conservative) decisions. Mano (as cited in George & Dane, 2016) conducted an experiment where he manipulated the sensation of pleasure (high and low), the degree of arousal (high and low) and observed its effects on decision making (risky or safe). Subjects had to decide how willing they were to pay for damage insurance or enter a lottery. When the high level of arousal was combined with a pleasant affective state, people were more willing to invest in risk (lottery) and instead the high level of arousal with an unpleasant affective state led people to seek to protect themselves from risk (sure). The role of the context will be fundamental: judging the level of activation as unpleasant has to do with the information that is in the situation (Forgas & George, as cited in George & Dane, 2016). When participants in decision-making situations were induced to process information in the situation in a direct, motivated, and congruent way, emotion levels were lower, while heuristic processing generated high emotion levels. Similarly, when we



experience a negative mood and do not know the probabilities of success or failure of a situation, we will be less willing to take risks (Au, Chan, Wang & Vertinsky as cited in George & Dane, 2016).

In other words, the association of a negative state of mind with uncertain decision-making situations leads people to reject options that are perceived as risky. This allows us to understand that in socioeconomic crisis situations (uncertain and in which the possible results are not well known), people will avoid or reject what is identified as risky (Wake & Satpute, 2020).

Why is fear so effective in pushing us to make decisions? Firstly, because fear (together with anxiety) are highly intolerable emotions, from which we seek to escape (Pyszczynski, 2014). If human beings are motivated to be alive, fear is there to warn us that our survival is threatened and it is an emotion that will stay there until it ensures that we are safe. However, fear has become more complex as we evolutionarily acquire some intellectual abilities that allow us to project ourselves into the future (Gilbert, 2006). In fact, Daniel Gilbert (2006) considers that this quality is what distinguishes us from other animals. These intellectual abilities have given us a single certainty in life: that one day we will die. The inevitability of death is the potential to create paralyzing terror. Culture then provides us with a scheme that gives order to the world and tells us what to do (Pyszczynski, 2014).

This theory that shows experimentally how the salience of our mortality leads us to close ourselves off and have more conservative world views is called Terror Management Theory. Typically, participants are either reminded of their mortality or some topic that is highly aversive but unrelated to the death (e.g., dental pain or being socially excluded) (Pyszczynski, 2014). In the first study of terror management theory by Rosenblatt et al. (1989), participants who were made salient about their mortality made much harsher judgments of someone who had trespassed a culturally acceptable norm. This shows that the return to conservatism (that things do not change) can in fact be provoked through a fear discourse that reminds of the finiteness of life or unpleasant events.

We can observe two separate intentions: while those who are not in power face an environment of chaos that they try to understand, the powerful have a clear agenda in causing fear. Chomsky (2002) summarizes well the intention of the discourse of fear in politics by pointing out that having the population terrified is extremely useful, as it allows people in power to pursue their own agenda without the population asking too many questions or being opposed. But for its part, the society that receives the messages has a clear intention: to survive.

1.4 FEAR IN THE MESSAGES USED IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Hilb (as cited in Valdés, Huerta & Pérez, 2014) identifies two central currents in the relationship with political fear: «the Hobbesian, which understands politics as a response to fear and the other close to Montesquieu, in which order is synonymous with security» (p. 135). In this line, the groups with political power and the State itself, usually identify or create enemies whose function—in discourse at least—is to frighten people, to later convince them that their security depends on said groups or on the State itself. In other words, for the political



class «fear becomes the central strategy to try to convince the crowds that their adversaries represent certain risks and can cause them different damages» (p. 136).

Thus, in the context of electoral campaigns, the strategy of fear is usually directed towards the middle and upper classes, since it emphasizes the possibilities that these social strata lose what they possess. In various Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Guatemala and Mexico, the parties and candidates identified as «conservatives» have used the strategy of fear to obtain the support of the middle and upper social classes, by characterizing the options identified from the «left» as dangerous (usually associating them with the term «populism»).

In all these cases, as Marín (2011) points out, fear works due to three fundamental factors that have been studied by social psychology:

- 1) The fear generated implies a physiological and emotional activation strong enough to generate uncertainty, but not so strong that it makes people avoid the message.
- 2) The messages make people attribute that state of uncertainty not to the message itself, but to the object or person accused of being dangerous.
- 3) The message is effective because at the same time it presents the solution to end the uncertainty (a candidate is presented as an alternative).

In Mexico in particular, Valdés, Huerta & Pérez (2014) point out that the strategy of fear was used in the student movements of 1968 and 1971. It was also key in the triumph of Ernesto Zedillo in 1994, who ran as the candidate for peace, taking advantage of the confusion over the assassinations of important figures such as Colosio, or the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation [EZLN]. What happened in the 2000 elections is also an example of a strategy of fear, when the PRI candidate Francisco Labastida tried to prevent the vote in favor of Vicente Fox, the opposition candidate, arguing that:

If the opposition won the presidency, a disaster would ensue. Economy, massive loss of jobs, a general flight of capital and the closure of many public agencies such as the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS), Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX), the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) and the National Institute of Geography and Informatics (INEGI), among others, in addition to endangering, according to what they said, public education –which also did not happen (p. 138, Valdés, Huerta & Pérez, 2014).

2. Method

Giménez (1981) distinguishes three possible functions of discourse: informative function, expressive function and argumentative function. While the informative function seeks to reduce the uncertainty of the listeners, the expressive self-reveals who is communicating and the argumentative function schematizes reality. Since the interest of this article lies in analyzing the use of fear in electoral decision-making through mainly heuristic forms of persuasion, it is important to analyze the argumentative function of communication. In this sense, methodologically it was decided to resort to discourse analysis, focusing specifically on one of the most widely used communication tools in contemporary political campaigns: the

advertising spot, that is, the short announcements broadcast on radio, television and other media.

In particular, Parker's (1996) discourse analysis proposal is taken up again, who proposes two dimensions for analysis:

- a) The sociohistorical contextualization of the discourse, which aims to study where and when the discourse appears, its function in the reproduction of the institutional framework, the position of the social actors involved and their role in the process of social change.
- b) The characterization of the discourse, which seeks to identify the objects, subjects and style of speech inscribed in it, which allow the identification of the vision or visions of the world that it reflects.

The messages used in political campaigns in Mexico were taken as a specific example to illustrate the discourse of fear and its effects, reviewing the specific case of the discourse used by the political opponents of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known by the acronym AMLO). The selection of messages was based on their popularity. It did not start from a universe of messages to make a selection, as the objective was to exemplify what was exposed about the discourse of fear and not to establish if all the political communication about AMLO was based on fear. The sociohistorical context of the discourse was established (Mexico, in the period 2006 to 2018) and it was characterized seeking to identify the actors, their position and their arguments.

This made it possible to follow up and discuss the effects of the messages during the three electoral contests in which he participated until he won the presidency. It was analyzed to what extent the discourse appealed to a central or peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1983), if it resorted to affective heuristics (Kahneman, 2012) and to what extent the elements of fear discourse were present: namely, a narrative of control oriented towards keeping people safe, dictating something to fear and what is best avoided (Altheide, 2010).

3. Analysis

3.1. THE APPEAL TO FEAR IN THE SPEECH AGAINST ANDRÉS MANUEL LÓPEZ OBRADOR (AMLO) IN MEXICO

a) Contextualization of the discourse: specific socio-historical environment, social actors involved and their respective positions

The first two times, he contested through an electoral alliance headed by the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and the third time by the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), in which he finally won. His main political opponents were the candidates of parties identified as center or right-wing on the Mexican political spectrum, such as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN).



b) Characterization of the discourse: recognition of the arguments and identification of the strategies

In the three aforementioned electoral processes, the fundamental strategy used by AMLO's political opponents, as will be shown, involved appealing to fear, seeking to influence the decision-making of voters and thus prevent his arrival as president. A selection of arguments raised mainly through advertising spots broadcast on television and radio is presented below.

In 2006, the media argument used by the PAN intentionally built the image of the politician Andrés Manuel López Obrador as a danger. One of the messages used featured an anguished citizen who said the following:

We finally got our own house, a car, a washing machine, a refrigerator. López Obrador is going to indebt Mexico, the interest that I pay is going to rise and I am not going to be able to pay, I am going to lose my patrimony as my parents lost it. I don't want a crisis for my children. I am going to vote for Felipe Calderón (Gutiérrez-Vidrio, 2007 p. 47).

The PAN campaign generated a large number of advertising spots focused on criticizing the positions of López Obrador. In all of them, at the end a text was presented in red that was repeated by a voice-over, which literally said «López Obrador: a danger to Mexico» (Campos, 2018). Other visual elements of the message, such as the music, the narrator's tone of voice, the type of colors, as well as the interspersed images of violence, emphasized fear in the face of catastrophic danger.

In another spot compiled by Campos (2018), it begins with a phrase that emphasizes the risks that are considered associated with AMLO's proposals: «López Obrador plays with the future of Mexico.» Later, it is stated that his «great ideas only mean debt and more debt» and that in his tenure as head of government of the then DF he had done nothing to resolve insecurity and violence.

As Gutiérrez-Vidrio (2007) points out, the argument does not resort to logic, since it does not explain why López Obrador would put Mexico into debt, but it does appeal to traumatic experiences of the past (such as previous economic crises) and immediately points out a way out. active to it: vote for a certain candidate (Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, PAN candidate). In terms of Kahneman (2012), a fast processing route is being followed, while all the elements of the fear discourse are observed.

In 2012, the PAN resorted to the same strategy, seeking to establish the idea that López Obrador was a violent person and that he was even willing to take an armed option to defend his victory, decontextualizing phrases used in a speech before university students in the Plaza de Tlatelolco (CDMX), on the occasion of the commemoration of the Massacre of October 2, 1968 (Milenio, 2012). Specifically, the spot shows the candidate saying «the armed path, a possibility for transformation.» When reviewing the original speech, the candidate referred to certain groups that had taken this alternative, and immediately after he pointed out that his movement will not follow that path, and that all his struggle will be peaceful.

In 2018, fear was once again appealed to to try to reduce the intention to vote for López Obrador, a candidate for MORENA. Various parties generated publicity spots in which

this candidate was compared to the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez. For example, regarding the proposal of the candidate of MORENA to have a mandate revocation exercise, in a PAN spot it is noted that «Chávez promised Venezuelans to consult every two years if he should continue in power, the consultation was a fraud, he stayed 14 years in the Presidency and destroyed an entire country. You have to know history so as not to repeat it» (Redacción Animal Político, 2018).

The link with the figure of Hugo Chávez did not begin in that year. Since 2006, in a PAN spot that begins with the caption “INTOLERANCE”, challenging phrases used by Chávez against the then president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, are compared with phrases used by AMLO to demand from him what he appreciated as an interference by Fox in the electoral process («Cállate chachalaca»).

For its part, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) finished off one of its spots in the 2018 campaign with the phrase «Choose: fear or Meade» (Meade was the PRI’s presidential candidate). In another video, images of López Obrador are shown at a rally where he talks about canceling the educational reform, and highlights riots and violent acts by the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) against citizens, while showing burned vehicles (Animal Político Newsroom, 2018). However, on this occasion these campaigns did not have the desired effect, as López Obrador became President of the Republic.

Despite his electoral triumph, the associations of the image of López Obrador with violence and the crisis have continued as part of the debate on his management of government, and have included messages that warn against attitudes considered by the political opposition as dictatorial. As recently as September 2020, opposition groups to the Lopez Obrador government describe his management as a dictatorial government. The National Anti-AMLO Front (FRENA) began a sit-in on that date near the Historic Center of Mexico City, stating «We are going to stay here until the dictator resigns» (Expansión, 2020) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. FRENA sit-in near the historic center of Mexico City. *Note.* The image of the sit-in shows the type of iconography and symbolism with which FRENA represents López-Obrador (with devil horns). Taken from Expansion (2020).



4. Results

4.1 THE EFFECTS OF MESSAGES THAT APPEAL TO FEAR

Buendía & Bustos (2006 as cited in Valdés, Huerta and Pérez, 2014, p. 138), identify four major effects of fear campaigns on voter decisions:

- a) In the first place, they reinforce already existing predispositions in the minds and hearts of citizens, in favor of or against certain political options (for example, in the messages analyzed, the predisposition of citizens against violence is reinforced, as well as fear of economic crises).
- b) Secondly, they also generate the activation of some voters, who did not intend to participate in the elections, but who finally, as a result of the fear campaigns, decide to participate in favor or against a certain political option.
- c) Thirdly, they manage to convert some voters who thought they would vote for one option, but end up doing so for another. In February 2006, the PRD, with López Obrador as candidate, was the leader with at least 8 points of difference over its rivals; in July of the same year, prior to the election, the difference had closed to 3 points (Campos, 2016). After an intense campaign to use spots appealing to fear, in the style of the aforementioned examples, it is to be presumed that a good part of those 5 points was associated with the effect of said campaign.
- d) Finally, this type of campaign also manages to deactivate many voters, who thought to participate in the elections, but in the end do not do so out of fear.

In specific terms and considering the emotional effect on decision-making, alarmist messages from electoral campaigns generate negative incidental emotions, a high degree of physiological arousal and displeasure (which is in fact what happens with fear). When a candidate is associated with risk, decision-making will seek to avoid it, seeking security and eliminating both displeasure and excessive arousal/activation (which in this context is judged as negative).

In the messages analyzed, the visual and auditory elements and the arguments clearly seek to generate that physiological arousal and displeasure, which led voters, particularly in 2006, to consider AMLO as a threat. Buendía & Bustos (2006 as cited in Valdés, Huerta and Pérez, 2014, p. 138), found that in the 2006 elections in Mexico, negative campaigns did have an effect on the electorate. Among the voters who say that their decision to vote was influenced by statements that López Obrador is a danger to Mexico, 52.2% voted for Felipe Calderón and only 17.34% did so for AMLO. Among the citizens who were influenced by the accusations about Felipe Calderón's brother-in-law, 56.6% voted for AMLO and only 20.5% did so for Felipe Calderón.

On the other hand, Andrade and Ariely (2009) found that these incidental effects of emotions were not necessarily temporary. Once a person makes a decision under the effects of a certain emotional experience, this effect appears to outlive the experience that originally generated it. People look for their decisions to be consistent with their past actions and cognitions, even if they are not aware to what extent this is due to incidental emotional

APPENDIX A

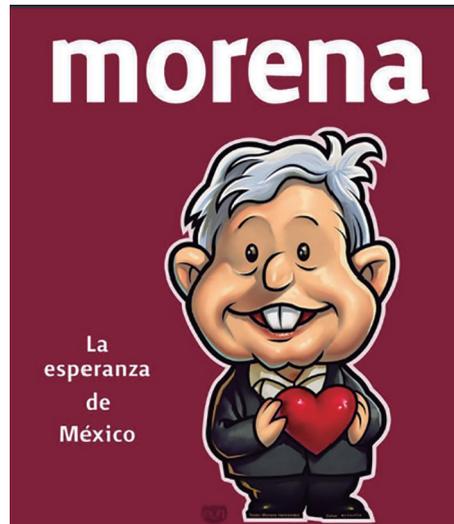


Figure 2. Advertising image of AMLO.* *Source:* Morena, 2007. *The image was used in the 2018 electoral campaign, where AMLO was promoted as a hope for the country.

reactions. In this way, the initial emotional reactions to something can become the basis for future decisions (even if their influence is not detected).

Regarding this, it was possible to observe in the analysis of the messages against AMLO, the constant repetition of advertising spots and messages that have circulated both in traditional mass media and in social networks cause incidental reactions of fear that, with the passage of time, have been strongly associated with the image that an important part of the electorate has of the current president. Furthermore, it is possible that this image has guided their decision-making in electoral processes. However, it is also possible to appreciate that the effects of the incidental emotional reaction can decline since, as will be discussed later, the effectiveness of the appeal to fear also reduces over time (in 2018 AMLO managed to win the elections with the 53.20% of the votes computed, according to the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary, 2018).

5. Discussion

The discourse of fear in various political communications has an imminent objective: to convince us that our mortality is a real and close event, or that those we love the most are threatened. Regardless of whether this is true, the important thing is to make us feel that it is so. Human beings live aware of our mortality, we just don't remember it all the time, but as soon as something reminds us of it, our priorities immediately change. Thus, fear is there to achieve a single function: to ensure our survival (Bar-Tal, 2001). The negative side is that it can lead to a paralysis that prevents social change, as fear continues to persist even when the stimulus that scared us is no longer there (Rodríguez, 2001).

In the various spots on AMLO that were analyzed, it can be observed that the fears that are most common in Mexicans (Hernández-Pozo et al., 2009) are appealed to, such as harm to the people they love the most (e.g., relatives, children, father, partner), poverty and violence. In this sense, it is not necessarily that the media have instilled these fears, but that they have taken advantage of them as they are realities of the Mexican people, e.g., in 2021 four out of ten Mexicans had an income that did not allow them to have the minimum necessary to survive. with well-being (National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy [CONEVAL], 2021). For this same reason, it is possible that the discourse of fear loses effectiveness: if the threat is an already lived reality, the message could be less powerful.

The discourse of fear works because it generates in people the salience of their mortality and the urgency to decide (Pyszczynski, 2004) which usually happens with their quick thinking and which usually has the effect of being more conservative, while seeking to protect. However, even when people act according to what the discourse of fear dictates, have they been fully persuaded? Have their positions changed internally? If it is enough for their behavior to change, it can be said that people are indeed being persuaded through an emotion. However, if you want people to also express conviction through their words, free of coercion, the answer will be no. Then the persuasion through emotions (including fear) will serve to make people act hastily, but at the same time an internal attitude change will not necessarily occur.

In this article, a series of political messages was revealed and its consequences were evidenced. At first, the fear discourse about AMLO had the desired effects, but later it did not. This shows that the continuous appeal to fear also has its limits and its effectiveness is not absolute, as even people were able to overcome fear and experience optimism about the future. In his attempts to counter fear campaigns, AMLO has systematically used words like «hope», «love» or «joy» as part of his campaign slogans; even the political party created by him, MORENA, ends all its advertising spots with the phrase «MORENA: the hope of Mexico» (Appendix A).

Hope itself is already part of a central and active process: while fear arises automatically in the face of a threat, hope itself requires a cognitive exercise, where creativity and flexibility overcome a fear located in a threatening present (Foust-Rodríguez, 2011). Therefore, although the discourse of fear and its effectiveness have been discussed, it does not have homogeneous effects on people, which is a fertile field of scientific interest.

The law of hedonic asymmetry explains the power of negative emotions and partly why positive emotions have unequal competition with them. We adapt differently to negative emotions than to positive ones: pleasure fades when satisfaction is continuous (e.g., an increase in income causes happiness only at first, then the effect wears off (Kahneman et al., 2006)), but we are not We get used to humiliation. “Fear can go on forever, while hope has a limited duration” (Frijda, 1988, p.354). However, this writing shows an example of a hopeful vision towards the future that overcomes the discourse of fear.

In Latin America, Mexico is not the only example of this. The publicity campaign for the plebiscite in 1988, which removed the dictator Pinochet from power in Chile, took place in a context of high violence and disappearances. Although there was a discourse of fear sustained by a state that constantly violated the population, an advertising campaign that opted for positive emotions won: in these spots that sought to get people to vote «No» (for Pinochet to continue in power) there were rainbows, songs and people smiling (BBC News Mundo, 2020). The exceptions that escape the discourse of fear seem to be related to the fact

that populations already experience the ravages of those with which they are threatened; what happened in cascade in other regions of Latin America (Huneus, 1997).

In the present writing, a series of advertising messages that come from the Mexican right and that were aimed at generating fear regarding the center-left fraction, represented by AMLO, were analyzed. However, this raises the question of whether, in general, people in power see society as easily manipulated through fear. In this sense, there are indications that there is a generalized discourse both on the political right and on the left that appeals to heuristic routes. Thus, a linguistic analysis found that the discourse of fear is present in both conservative and liberal communications published in North American and British newspapers (Galuzka, 2019). What is still not clear is whether the discourse of fear, through propaganda, generates emotions in the electorate with direct repercussions on their vote or if it reaffirms positions that already existed (Bárcena-Juárez & Uribe-Cortés, 2019). In any case, while the discourse of fear is not always effective, it can be said that people are not empty vessels where the discourse of fear is automatically inserted, but rather that people already have beliefs, previous values and the possibility of resisting the discourse.

6. Conclusions

The theoretical framework of the discourse of fear is useful to analyze the messages that come from a political faction that has clear intentions about the population. Central and peripheral processing pathways, as well as terror management theory, provide us with an explanation of how fear works to lead people to make conservative decisions based on heuristic pathways. The examples analyzed show that these processes can even significantly affect electoral results, although not permanently. From this, while the discourse of fear is not always effective, there is a fertile field in research to explain in what circumstances people can overcome a fatalistic discourse to build hope for an uncertain future.

7. References

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