

Production of meaning and agency of children as political communication audiences

Producción de sentido y agencia de audiencias infantiles de comunicación política

Produção de sentido e agenciamento de audiências infantis de comunicação política

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Given that electoral campaigns are spaces for citizenship construction and children are interested in politics, recognizing them as a political communication audience would promote their rights. With an approach from cultural studies and qualitative methodology, the relationship of knowledge and expectations with assessments and proposals is analyzed as part of their process of making sense about the 2018 Mexican presidential campaign. There is evidence of self-recognition about the agency of girls and boys aged 10 to 12 years as political communication audience.

KEYWORDS: Political communication, audiences, citizenship, elections, childhood.

En tanto que las campañas electorales son espacios para construir ciudadanía y la niñez se interesa por la política, reconocerles como audiencias de comunicación política promovería sus derechos. Desde los estudios culturales y la metodología cualitativa, se analiza la relación de conocimientos y expectativas con evaluaciones y propuestas, como parte de su producción de sentido sobre la campaña presidencial de 2018 en México. Se evidencia el autorreconocimiento entre niñas y niños de 10 a 12 años de su agencia como audiencias de comunicación política.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunicación política, audiencia, ciudadanía, elecciones, infancia.

Como as campanhas eleitorais são espaços de construção da cidadania e as crianças se interessam por política, reconhecê-las como audiências de comunicação política promoveria seus direitos. A partir de estudos culturais e metodologia qualitativa, analisa-se a relação de conhecimentos e expectativas com avaliações e propostas, como parte de sua produção de sentido sobre sua campanha presidencial de 2018 no México. É evidente o auto-reconhecimento de meninas e meninos de 10 a 12 anos de sua atuação como públicos de comunicação política.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação política, audiência, cidadania, eleições, infância.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship of knowledge and expectations about politics with assessments and proposals about the political-electoral communication model among child audiences in Mexico City is analyzed as part of their production of meaning about the 2018 presidential campaign. This article seeks to contribute to the discussion on the child audiences' agency, in the context of an ambivalent position between guardianship and autonomy (Gaitán-Muñoz, 2018), recognizing the modes of their activity in the negotiation regarding the mediatization of politics (Verón, 1998b) associated with notions of what they expect from the actors of political life, for the benefit of their environment and their own daily life. Although the meanings are not susceptible to measurement (Verón, 1998a), it is possible to approach their relationships, from the experiences of the subjects, for which a qualitative approach is proposed, from Cultural Studies, that presents evidence on the interest of children in mediated politics and in participating in the transformation of their environment, in relation to their processes of production of meaning.

The electoral campaign took place in the context of the lowest presidential approval of the last four six-year periods (Parametría, 2017) and with expectations before the possible alternation in power (Latinobarómetro, 2018) due to historical distrust and weariness, translated into the consideration of the vote and community practices as the most effective ways to influence public decisions and local problems (Instituto Nacional Electoral & El Colegio de México, 2015; Instituto Electoral de la Ciudad de México, 2018; Latinobarómetro, 2018). Thus, for the first time an opposition movement won.

It is precisely in the electoral campaigns where the candidates propose solutions to social, political and economic problems; however, the quality of the information circulating during those periods, in which attack and confrontation prevail (Muñiz, 2022), may be questionable and, in addition, childhoods tend to appear blurred. Although in 2018 they were part of the speeches coming from candidates, civil society organizations, and the electoral institution, and UNICEF urged candidates to consider childhoods in their proposals (Proceso, 2018),

until then, they had more presence in propaganda than as an audience (Córdova, 2017).

On the other hand, public policies face the challenge of overcoming notions of children as passive agents, recipients of indications and in need of protection, at the expense of the recognition of their autonomy (Rodríguez-Pascual, 2012; UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, recognizing children as audiences of political communication, creating spaces in electoral campaigns for their participation and access to information, could be a way to build citizenship.

STUDIES WITH CHILDREN AS AUDIENCES AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

This research is supported by two great points of reference: the Cultural Studies of Audiences and the Social Studies of Childhood. Although the studies of political socialisation could present theoretical contradictions with the others above mentioned, they have been considered to register their contributions.

The Martín-Barbero's (1987) proposal, resulted a paradigm shift that makes the approach to communication more complex (Repoll, 2010), and, with the operationalization proposed by Orozco (2006) with multiple mediation model, differentiated processes of negotiation of the audiences are recognized. On the other hand, the Sociology of Childhood proposes to stop considering them in preparation for adulthood (Gaitán-Muñoz, 2018; Rodríguez-Pascual, 2012); it reflects on the relationship between agency and structure in social life and questions linear and decontextualized conceptions of socialisation, making evident the contradictions in these processes (Prout & James, 1997).

In studies with youngsters, especially with childhoods, it has been identified that the production of meaning and political socialisation are affected by socioeconomic status, by the diversity of information sources, and by conversations with family members and teachers (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001; Ibarra, 2007; Lee et al., 2013; Llopis-Goig, 2004; Mascheroni et al., 2016; Orozco, 2006; Vergara del S. et al., 2010). It has been reported that children do not access politics

through the media, because the speeches are not in the children's narrative register (Ángel & Alvarado, 2010), but that the consumption of news among children and adolescents, accompanied or not by their relatives, predisposes them to participate (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001; Lee et al., 2013); in addition, young people have genuine concerns about politics and demands for simple and honest communication from politicians and journalists (Echeverría-Victoria, 2011), because it is an area that generates mistrust (Padilla de la Torre, 2014).

Likewise, there is research on the sources of information that participate in the construction of social representations on matters of public interest such as war (López de la Roche, 2011) or insecurity and crime (Inzunza-Acedo, 2017). In addition, the influence of the media is less when the family is present and when the school offers spaces for the discussion of these issues (López de la Roche, 2011); the media are a source of information, while the family is a source of attitudes (Inzunza-Acedo, 2017). Thus, the media are not a source of knowledge if they are not associated with interpersonal communication processes (Gidengil et al., 2016; López de la Roche, 2008).

Child political socialization studies focus on politicization and expectations about the future (Segovia, 1975); in the role that the family, school and the media play in the development of political commitment in childhood (Muñiz et al., 2020); in the relationship of children and adolescents with politics and the level of information they have (Acosta, 2012; Echeverría-Victoria, 2011; Nateras-Domínguez, 2007) and its impact on the formation of democratic values and attitudes towards civic participation (Huerta-Wong, 2007; Wessa, 2012), as well as the gender gap in political knowledge (Acosta, 2012; Hernández et al., 2020). It has been found there is no association between age and political sophistication or citizenship-building, if it does not interact with schooling (Huerta-Wong, 2007). There is a lack of consensus on the influence of variables such as gender on this socialization (Acosta, 2012; Hernández et al., 2020); the type of school (Acosta, 2012; Segovia, 1975) and media exposure (Huerta-Wong, 2007; Nateras-Domínguez, 2007).

So, it can be noted that, in addition to the discussion about these variables, one of the absences is related to the production

of meaning among the youngsters, especially children, regarding the mediatization of politics and their position as an audience. Consequently, it is proposed to revise the production of meaning of child audiences of political communication, to offer evidence about the children's interest not only in the subject itself, but also in learning, proposing and participating. They are recognized as agents with the ability to transform their environment, and as protagonists by narrating their experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The production of meaning happens in the acknowledgments and negotiations on media content and in the exchanges within the routine practices of the audiences and is consolidated in the (re)construction -in our minds, practices and institutions- of the certainties about the everyday realities with which we relate (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Verón, 1998a; Vizer, 2003). Every communication action has three dimensions: referential, inter-referential and self-referential (Vizer, 2003, 2008). The referential relates to what is known about materiality and its context (time, space and agents); the inter-referential, to the relationships between the represented actors; and the self-referential, to the recognition of both the other and the self-represented. These recognitions can be based on the lack of knowledge of both the other and the self (Ricoeur, 2005), but in the end they are also part of the meaning produced.

These certainties are diluted in the permanent conflict and the struggle for control between social agents, where the self-recognition of the agency in relation to these object realities happens as well (Vizer, 2003, 2008). These processes cannot be understood without looking at the context in which collective subjects live their experiences: the production of meaning is individual, but it is woven into shared stories (Osses & Valderrama, 2019).

The concept of audience is assumed to be in force since it originated before the mass media. Only now the social subjects coexist with other devices and forms of content production, circulation and exchange, but their activity has been inherent to that diversity of being an audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Lozano, 2014). In this variety

of experiences is the link with public affairs as a way of building citizenship. In general terms, while the liberal perspective focuses on individual citizenship and its links with the Nation-State, republicanism values plurality and political communities. Cultural Studies integrate both visions to recognize identity diversities; cultural citizenship enables the understanding of the competences shared by the audiences and the meanings of political practices (Padilla de la Torre, 2014).

Also, active citizenship –as a conscious exercise of responsibilities and obligations– and differentiated citizenship –which recognizes cultural and social pluralism– are proposed in response to hegemonic notions of citizenship (Benedicto, 2016). From the radical democratic conception, active citizenship is manifested in the actions of the subjects in the public space, as part of a collective environment, resulting in political communities. And differentiated citizenship questions the ideal of universality, given that the group interest has led to the exclusion of groups (Benedicto & Morán, 2007; Young en Gaitán-Muñoz, 2018). The liberal perspective present in the legal recognition of children’s rights translates into granting others that exercise on their behalf. Considering them among emerging actors who are reorienting some forms of political participation “is an opportunity to rethink their position as citizens, as well as to reformulate the way in which society, and the law, must accept their own demands” (Gaitán-Muñoz, 2018, p. 25).

By assuming that the audiences are a group of social agents, active in their individual processes, and interested in the mediatization of politics that can result in influencing public affairs, it is considered pertinent to address the concept of political participation, which is characterized by having more conventional means of intervention, such as voting, and others that could be even illegal (Sabucedo, 1988). In between, and intentionally removed from institutional politics (Carpentier, 2012), there are private and community actions (sub-activism) that can be experienced as power to be the aspired person according to their political and moral standards (Bakardjieva, 2010). An important part of the information that becomes knowledge is obtained from the media and, to participate, plural and quality information is needed (Guerrero & Luengas, 2014).

METHOD

A qualitative approach was proposed to look at the distinctive characteristics in the activity processes of child audiences and to understand them as objects built by the subjects, not as events that happen without their will (Orozco & González, 2011). The triangulation of research techniques was chosen to favor spontaneity in the elaboration of their own narratives: with collective interviews, supported by the request for drawings and the writing of a letter addressed to the presidential candidates, it was possible to boost the discourse and incentivize the exchanges; the pilot phase made it clear that it would not have been possible with a single tool. Between April and July 2018, interviews with natural groups were carried out, as they reduce the effort to develop the discussion and favour a less directed moderation (Lefébure, 2011); there were ten girls and nine boys divided into six groups of between two and six participants each. The children's drawings were used to address the research topic without making explicit mention of it (Inzunza-Acedo, 2017). And the request for letters to the candidates is a proposal generated for this research, to identify children's agendas.

The participants involved in the research are in the middle socioeconomic level, from both public and private² elementary schools, which has given a certain degree of heterogeneity. They were chosen by a convenience sampling (Jensen, 2014), because it is difficult to interview children, due to the protection to which they are subject.³ The considerations on the formation of the political notion phases were considered and it was decided to work with children between 10 and 12 years of age, when they begin to understand the conflict that is

² In the verbalizations recovered from the interviews, public schools are identified with the letter A and private schools with the letter B.

³ The fieldwork was carried out with informed consent from girls, boys and tutors. The participating children were informed of the purposes of the research and about the possibility that they would refuse to collaborate, even though their parents had accepted, and that they could quit whenever they decided.

experienced in politics and they prioritize figures (Nateras-Domínguez, 2013).

The application were carried out in isolated spaces without the presence of third parties, with the authorization of children, parents and teachers. The interviews were planned to last a maximum of 40 minutes, based on suggestions in the literature (Rodríguez & Muñiz, 2009), but with the pilot test it was observed that they could last longer by including alternate activities, so sessions of between one and two hours were achieved, as shown in Table 1. It was essential to tell the children that everything they shall share would be valuable, respectable and confidential, as well as not requesting to avoid noises that would affect the recording, and not interrupting them when there were slight deviations from the topic, because that inhibited their expression.

The interviews, drawings and letters were manually transcribed and coded⁴ (Saldaña, 2009), they were pre-coded with categories from the theoretical framework; after several coding cycles, the codes *citizens*, *politicians* and *institutions* were grouped into the categories *knowledge* and *expectations*, of the referential dimension; and the codes: *campaign/competition*, *candidates/proposals*, *formats*, *election results* and *children in the campaign*, were grouped into the categories *assessments* and *proposals*, of the inter-referential and self-referential dimensions (Vizer, 2003, 2008).

RESULTS

Knowledge and expectations about political life and its actors

Citizens. Among the children's knowledge, the distinction between legal notions and citizenship practices associated with the age of legal majority and with actions for the common good typical of any subject committed to their community stands out: "not only by age does it mean if you are (a citizen)" (girl, A1), "although they will be recognized (as citizens) when they are over 18 years old" (boy, B2); and they question:

⁴ The drawings and the letters were used as tools to boost the discourse, so they were analyzed in a complementary way together with the transcripts of the interviews using the same codes. Semiotic or discourse analysis was not applied.

TABLE 1
GROUP DISTRIBUTION

Participants	Age and school grade	Type of educational institution ^a	Date, place and duration of the interview
Three girls (A1)	10 and 11 years old. 5 th and 6 th grade.	Public school	June 5 th , 2018, 11 and 25, at their school (1 h 23 min; 56 min; 1 h 33 min) ^b
Two girls (A2)	10 and 11 years old. 5 th and 6 th grade.	Public school dependent on a Secretary of State	June 19 th , 2018, at their homes (1 h 46 min)
Four girls (B1)	10 and 12 years old. 5 th and 6 th grade.	Private catholic school	April 13 th , 2018, at home of one of them (1 h 50 min)
Three boys (B2)	11 years old. 6 th grade	Humanist and constructivist private school	July 2 nd , 2018, at their school (1 h 31 min)
Five boys (B3)	11 and 12 years old. 6 th grade	Constructivist private school	July 4 th , 2018, at home of one of them (1 h 51 min)
One girl and one boy ^c (B4)	11 years old. 6 th grade	Private catholic school	July 6 th , 2018, at the girl's home (55 min)

^a The type of pedagogical project of the educational institutions is only included to show the relative heterogeneity of the participants.

^b With this group it was possible to conduct interviews at different times of the campaign.

^c Due to the activities of the mother, the kid participated only for the first half of the interview.

Source: Own elaboration.

“I think that they say that... here at school... that we are not citizens, it must be for a good reason. But the truth is, I believe that we are citizens... those who did that thought that, if we don't vote for someone, we are not citizens because we don't choose the future, but we can also help” (girl, A1).

Regarding the expectations that children have, it was found that citizens are considered important actors because they must “help their community and not litter” (girls, A2) and perform civil responsibilities: “vote, be responsible, denounce” (boy, B3); “it also represents voting” (girl, A1). And regarding the link between audience and citizenship, children think it is important to get well informed before voting “about what (the candidates) have done” (girl, A1), to think about “what would happen if those proposals became a reality” (girl, A2) and then verify “to see if they are continuing the line of corruption” (boy, B2). To do this, it is necessary to be informed and have a critical perspective, because “the Internet misinforms. You can't really know what's going on... Rather, we need to understand the causes of everything” (boy, B2).

Politicians. Regarding the presidential campaign, all the children have knowledge of the biography, trajectory and preparation of the candidates, as well as of corruption scandals that arose during that period (boy, B3), such as the one about the “... industrial warehouses, or something like that... is still not settled ... The investigation is still on-going in the PGR [Attorney General's Office]” (boys, B3).

“[López Obrador] has been in those 3 and nothing ... he had to create his own party and now he did win knowing his strategy and the people want a change” (boys, B1).

“Anaya seemed qualified” (boy, B3).

Children know the candidates' proposals and identify the independent candidacies, as well as the formats of the spots and the electoral debates, they know that the latter have a much longer duration than the former to expose the campaign proposals, and that there is a moderator that assigns time limits for such purpose; the drawing 1 (girl, A1) illustrates this. In addition, they have references

about the existence of false information on the Internet about the campaign (girl, A1; boys B2, B3), which is part of the strategies to obtain votes (girl, A1): “they pay people to say...” (girl, A1).

They also know that the president has a cabinet that needs to be composed of experts, otherwise it would ruin their work: “some, like Porfirio Díaz, were good, but they were surrounded with people who were not” (boy, B3). On the other hand, they know that this team prepares political speeches which are not always truthful: “that’s how they are born” [politicians, but also] “someone helps them... to deceive the population” (girl, A1). They expect honesty from politicians and that they think about the common good, but they mistrust them because “all of them are corrupt... all of them are thieves... My dad said that they all go for the money” (girls, A1) and they abuse demagoguery -they “make false promises” (girl, A1) - and most seek to satisfy particular interests (girls, A1, A2, B4; boys B2, B3): “they have to start thinking about what they spend the money on, but not on themselves, but for roads, people who don’t have money, medicines” (girl, A2). Letter 1 expresses this demand⁵ (boy, B3).

DRAWING 1



⁵ Drawing 1 Translation: The Debate.

Letter 1 translation: Andrés Manuel, I hope you have a successful government, that you work for the benefit of people, that you do good things, that you care about Mexican people more than for your money. I wish you the best.

LETTER 1

Andrés Manuel,
 Espero que tengas un gobierno exitoso.
 Que seas por el bien de la gente,
 que hagas buenas cosas. Que te
 preocupes por los mexicanos más que
 por tu dinero.

Te deseo lo
 mejor,

Institutions. Children are aware of the existence of systems to demand accountability: “people are supposed to be able to ask what is done with the money” (boy, B2) and about the representative role of those who hold elected positions: “a government... that represents each citizen, each way of being, from the homeless man to the rich city tycoon” (boy, B3). All of them know about the functions of the National Electoral Institute (INE) and the participation of citizens in the elections: “the citizens [count the votes], it can be a people that is going to vote and people from that people can play the role they want in the elections; [later they take the votes] to the INE” (girls, A1), which “organizes the elections... so that one candidate wins... and they are the president of Mexico” (girls, B1), a task that requires “precision” (boy, B3), also when reporting the results and granting resources to political parties. In this context, they know of the political alternation in the history of the country.

In letter 2 part of the problems of Mexico are manifested⁶ (girl, A2); kids also identify violence, insecurity, corruption, impunity, as well as the deterioration of the environment (girls, A1, A2, B1), poverty and

⁶ Letter 2 translation: Mexico, City, June 19, 2018. Candidates: Good afternoon candidates, I have a petition to make in case any of you becomes president, and I hope you really consider this petition which is the following, there has to be a balance between the

LETTER 2

ciudad de México 9 de Junio a 2018

candidatos

buenas tardes candidatos, les mando una petición si alguno logra ser presidente y espero que la tomen muy en cuenta, la propuesta es la siguiente, tiene que haber un equilibrio entre el ser humano y la naturaleza, gracias al presidente Enrique Peña Nieto que a destruido más de 1000 manglares, les pido que recuperen esos manglares y hacer areas para proteger las especies en pe manglares y y no mandar animales de otras areas al zoológico de Chapultepec porque no estan en su area natural y podrian morir.

gracias por su tiempo, les mando un cordial saludo, adios

lack of gender equity (girls, A1, A2, B1, B4) as well as lack of spaces for citizen demonstration (children, B2, B3). They express that they are concerned about “pollution... They throw garbage into the seas... Bees are facing extinction... I think the ozone layer or global warming are over” (girls, B1), as well as “poverty, inequality, corruption” (girl, B4), “violence, I think the police make deals with people in prison” (girls, B1). And “if Mexico does not have a good education, it won’t get better. That is why there’s so much insecurity, violence, corruption” (boys, B3). They are also afraid to go to marches, “because I don’t want to end up like people in 1968” (boys, B3).

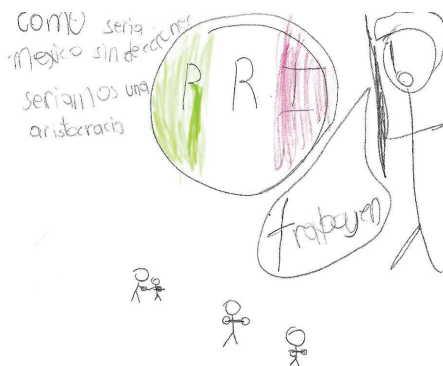
Thus, they have expectations about fighting corruption, within the framework of a political system that favors equal access to power and social welfare (girl, A1): “I have never understood why the rich govern and why the people are poor” (girl, A1). And that there be transparent and equitable renewal of popularly elected positions,

human being and nature, President Peña Nieto has destroyed more than 1000 mangroves, I ask you to recover them and create areas to protect endangered species, and not to send animals from other areas to the Chapultepec Zoo because they are not in their natural environment and they could die. Thank you for your time, I send a cordial greeting, bye.

because “it has not been fair, they do not give independents [candidates] as much” (boys, B3). Despite the negative assessments, they consider political alternation as progress (girl, A2; boy, B3), otherwise, democracy would be a fallacy: “they used to lie, that you went to vote but you were not really voting, the PRI continued to be in power” (boy, B3). Drawing 2 shows what Mexico would be like without elections⁷ (boy, B3), which is similar to the previous story.

Although it is not the intention of this research to reveal the origin of this knowledge or to measure it, it was found that, as part of the children’s school education, they have learned about the legal notions of citizenship, the relatively recent recognition of women’s right to vote, the representative function of rulers and the importance of verifying sources when looking for information on the Internet. However, family conversations and the media have also served as sources of information about the 2018 presidential campaign process, which is consistent with the literature (Inzunza-Acedo, 2017; López de la Roche, 2008, 2011). It stands out that they question what is expressed by relatives and the school study programs, but not the teachers’ opinions, who apparently do not share them with their students. So, these judgments could be a

DRAWING 2



⁷ Translation of the text in the drawing: How Mexico would be without elections: we would be an aristocracy. On the other side it says: work!

nuance regarding of what Inzunza-Acedo (2017) states, in terms of the family as a source of attitudes, since children may not coincide with the opinions of the adults around them, but they do have disposition to debate.

It stands out that both girls and boys from private and public schools identify conflicts in political life related to moral values and abuse of power, and know about the actors who seek public office and their background, which accounts for the relevance of the articulation between the interaction with this type of information and the place the media could offer for the construction of citizenship, although apparently, children from private schools seem to have more specific knowledge about political figures. Children being able to identify false information financed with campaign resources are evidence of their media literacy and their activity as audiences.

And while girls in public schools question hegemonic notions of citizenship, boys in private schools relate this to the lack of spaces for participation, including child's participation. They are all interested in forms of conventional participation, although boys are more motivated to act in the public space, and girls, with community and private forms. Without distinction of gender or type of school, they recognize citizens at a disadvantage, compared to other actors, regarding the possibility to participate, but still expect for their commitment. Girls from both types of schools express themselves with more intensity than boys about the expectation of moral values and of congruence between politician's discourse and action. Thus, the demand for simple language is consistent with the literature (Echeverría-Victoria, 2011), which is associated with the fact that minors do have access to politics due to its media coverage –unlike what was pointed out by Ángel & Alvarado (2010) –, but also from family conversations, as has been reported (Gidengil et al., 2016; Inzunza-Acedo, 2017; López de la Roche, 2008, 2011). These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Assessments and proposals on the campaign

Campaign/competition. Regarding the assessments, the questioning of the media is not very clear, but it is when it comes to the campaign. Children talk about dishonesty and unfair competition, for example,

“Anaya took out his candidate Margarita Zavala” (boy, B3). They also comment that there were spots seeking to cause fear: “What do you prefer? Meade or fear? (boy, B3). They affirm that spot intended to “suggest governing with fear. If you cannot govern peacefully, with fear” (boy, B3). They call it a “dirty war” (boy, B3), in the midst of Morena’s possible triumph: “they know they’re going to win” (girl, A1). Although they think that the campaigns are useless, because “they promise, but they don’t deliver” (girl, A1), with the discussion kids affirm that this way “they inform people of what they will do” (girl, B1).

Candidates/proposals. Almost all children identify and give their opinion on the candidates’ proposals. One of the most discussed proposals was that of Andrés Manuel López Obrador to support disadvantaged sectors (girls, A1; boys, B2, B3). Although they agree with equality, some children fear the abandonment of the others (boy, B2) or that it results in imbalances: “you have to pay attention to the poor people, but you also have to be careful not to tilt all the balance towards...” (boy, B3). Not all kids agree and they accept dissent. On the other hand, they propose that the candidates assess the feasibility of their proposals: “for example, that old man, AMLO, was going to give them [the poor] money, well, where is it going to come from? So, he is going to collect more taxes from those who have money” (boy, B3). And “Anaya wants to make schools full time, but he has to think about it like four times because many of them can’t” (girl, A2). They also insist on moral values (girls, A1, A2, B4): “I would vote for Meade, but I wish he was from another party. I couldn’t vote for him because he’s the PRI candidate and it’s very corrupt” (girl, A2).

Formats. They reject the show made up of lies and attacks between candidates displayed in spots and debates; a negative campaign announces that “this government is not convenient for us” (girl, A1). A political show does not generate a place to discuss and decide the vote: “a political campaign that everyone turned into a meme” (boy, B2). Consequently, they are inclined to reduce or eliminate the campaign spots, because “they have already said their proposals in the debates”

TABLE 2
REFERENTIAL DIMENSION

Category	Referent	Girls	Boys	Private schools	Public schools	All subjects
Knowledge	Citizens	---	---	---	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinction between legal notions and citizenship practices
	Politicians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rulers: deceive people • False information: electoral strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cabinet: experts corruption scandals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cabinet: experts corruption scandals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rulers: deceive people • False information: electoral strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidates' biography, trajectory and preparation; proposals, format of spots and debates and false information on the Internet
	Institutions	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability • Representativeness of public offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability • Representativeness of public offices 	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INE functions and citizen participation in the electoral process • Political alternation

Category	Referent	Girls	Boys	Private schools	Public schools	All subjects
Expectations	Citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To avoid environmental pollution 	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To avoid environmental pollution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To avoid environmental pollution 	Contribute to their community, be well-informed, vote and demand
	Politicians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral values and action-speech coherence Demand for plain language: abuse of demagoguery 	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral values and action-speech coherence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moral values and action-speech coherence Demand for plain language: abuse of demagoguery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honesty and thinking about the common good
	Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity in access to power and social welfare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fight against corruption and transparency and equity in renewing of elected offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fight against corruption and transparency and equity in renewing of elected offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity in access to power and social welfare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue with the political alternation

Source: Prepared by the author.

(girl, A2) and “they should say what they’ll do, and that’s it, so it’s not so repetitive” (girl, B1), because they were only “attacking each other” (boy, B2).

Childhoods in the campaigns. Finally, the children do not feel the candidates’ discourses are directed to them, because they do not identify their agenda in those proposals, since “surely they do not care” (girl, A2), because they can’t vote (girl, B1). They add that, although some spots talk about children, as in the Movimiento Ciudadano jingle, which says that “the future is in our hands, of children, who are free, convinced that everything is possible” (girls, B1), they feel that they don’t have the opportunity to express themselves about the campaign in public spaces (girls, B1; boys, B2, B3). For this reason, they propose that “this must be changed, that children also give their opinions on everything they think about politics” (boy, B2), as expressed in letter 3⁸ (girl, B1).

Election results. Regarding the reasons for the victory of the Morena candidate, children express interpretations associated with the lack of access to information, or to keep the PRI from winning (girl, A1; boy, B3) and out of loyalty for receiving financial support, “because many old people voted... poor people, because they were given with the card through which they get 1,000 pesos a month” (boys, B2). Those who support him point out that “we are speculating bad things about López

⁸ Letter translation: Mexico City, April 13, 2018. Dear deputies: We children want you not to be so corrupt, to end the violence, we want to have better teachers so that we can learn better and have a better city.

Also, that you care about children’s opinions, and if the children want to say something to you, we try to get you deputies to do something for the city, that you pay attention to us.

And that you do something so that we children can vote too, for our future, and that we have options too.

And the adults who listen to what you say and vote, you deputies have to keep your promises and don’t leave it as if it didn’t matter. We children want to be part of Mexico City too.

LETTER 3

Ciudad de México a 13 de Abril del 2018

Estimados diputados:

Nosotros los niños queremos que no sean tan corruptos que acaben con la violencia, que haya mejores maestros para que nosotros los niños podamos aprender mejor y ahíga una ciudad mejor.

Y que también tomen en cuenta a los niños y si los niños les avieren decir algo, tratar de que ustedes diputados hagan algo por la ciudad que les hagan caso.

Y que hagan algo para que nosotros los niños podamos ~~to~~ tomar también, para nuestro futuro y también ahíga opciones para nosotros.

Y a los adultos que les hagan caso a lo que hacen o digan al votar y lo que ustedes los diputados prometan cumplalo y no lo dejen como si no importara.

Nosotros también queremos ser parte de la ciudad de México

Obrador when he is not even the official president” (boy, B3), but they trust that “AMLO is competent because he has a very good cabinet” (boy, B3).

In this way, knowledge and interest in politics and its media coverage are associated with the positive assessment of electoral campaigns for democracy, but with questions about the political-electoral communication model in Mexico. Likewise, it is observed that more than attributing power to the media, those who use them to transmit messages and inform themselves are held responsible, evidencing the recognition of the agency of both producers and audiences, identifying

themselves as audiences, by recognizing the contents, aspiring to participate and accepting dissent.

It stands out that all children discuss the infeasibility of some campaign proposals and recognize persuasive intentions in unfair competition. They reject this strategy and propose to give greater importance to informative spaces than to propaganda ones. Children from private schools identify that the consequence of campaigns turned into a show is that they do not fulfill their function of informing, and girls from private schools point out the limit of these campaigns in modifying the intention of voting, recognizing the audiences' agency.

Also, they all agree with proposals for the benefit of disadvantaged sectors, but children from private schools point out that those in a better condition can be affected, which could be associated with self-recognition of well-being conditions. The girls from both types of schools state that politicians are not interested in making proposals for children because they cannot vote. All of them are aware of the use of the image of childhoods in campaigns, but the lack of spaces for their participation. Meanwhile, in the private schools children's proposals, the motivation to action is present again, by seeking to alleviate that exclusion. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

As a result, it is proposed that the analysis of the three dimensions of communication as components of the production of meaning of child audiences of political communication show children's agency from a group of larger categories (Saldaña, 2009) represented as it follows:

1. *Comprehension capacity*: it requires tools to identify and prioritize the organization of political life and its actors, especially their exchanges during an electoral period.
2. *Capacity for judgment*: it is about assessing what is identified as and what is distanced from the common good and democratic values, in relation to the practices of the actors of political life and their communication.
3. *Capacity for demand*: it's being aware of the possibility of demanding from the actors of political life the pertinent actions for the common welfare and democracy.

TABLE 3
INTER-REFERENTIAL AND SELF-REFERENTIAL DIMENSIONS

Category	Referent	Girls	Boys	Private schools	Public schools	All subjects
Assessments	Campaign/ competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attacks: government that isn't convenient for us Limit on the modification of the vote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turned into a show: they fail to fulfil their democratic function 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turned into a show: they fail to fulfil their democratic function Limit on the modification of the vote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attacks: government that isn't convenient for us 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dishonesty and unfair competition In favour of campaigns, but rejecting the Mexican model
	Candidates/ proposals	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing poverty may result in imbalances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing poverty may result in imbalances 	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In favour of equality in the distribution of wealth
	Formats	---	---	---	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attacks on spots and debates
	Childhoods in the campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No proposals for children because they don't vote 	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No proposals for children because they don't vote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No proposals for children because they don't vote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children do not feel part of the public They use their image, but there are no spaces for them to participate
	Election results	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Got votes from those who receive economic support AMLO has a good cabinet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Got votes from those who receive economic support AMLO has a good cabinet 	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To keep the PRI from winning

Category	Referent	Girls	Boys	Private schools	Public schools	All subjects
Proposals	Campaign/ competition	A way to inform about government proposals	---	A way to inform about government proposals	---	---
	Candidates/ proposals	Moral values	---	Moral values	Moral values	Verify feasibility of proposals
	Formats	Reduce/eliminate spots	---	Reduce/eliminate spots	Reduce/ eliminate spots	---
	Childhoods in the campaign	Take care of the environment	Lack of spaces for childhoods' expression	Lack of spaces for childhoods' expression Take care of the environment	Take care of the environment	---

Source: Prepared by the author.

4. *Capacity to act*: it is understood as the self-recognition of one's own resources to act for the common good and for the development of democracy, supported by exchanges in the public space. This proposal is summarized in Diagram 1.

DISCUSSION

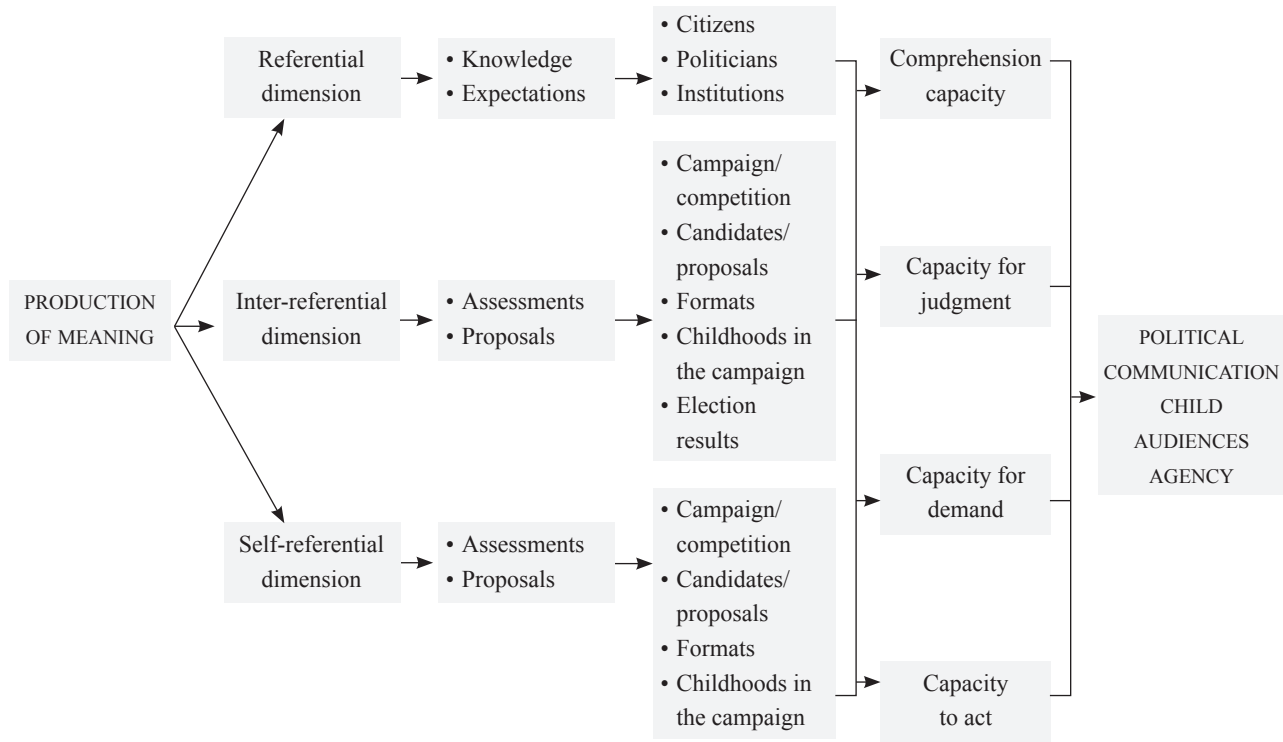
The participants question Mexico's political-electoral communication model for being turned into a show based on unfair competition and not offering the citizens the opportunity to inform them and reason their vote, but also for not considering children on the agenda. They associate governments and politicians with corruption and impunity, which is why children demand that candidates keep their campaign promises; they also recognize the need for a citizenry that is committed as an audience of mediated politics, one that is informed and that makes demands to the authorities.

Thus, the approach to the referential dimension of communication shows the children's link between knowledge and expectations about political life and its actors with assessments and proposals about the model of political-electoral communication, which allows evidencing their negotiation processes about how each actor in political life should participate in the consolidation of the country's democracy, recognizing the agency of the subjects -including their own- and not an absolute power of the media.

So, children think that citizens, politicians and institutions should seek the common good, within the framework of a political system that promotes legality, justice and equity; on the other hand, an electoral campaign should be based on honesty, inclusion, the right to information and participation. Thus, regarding the inter-referential dimension, they identify the links between subjects represented in the speeches of the 2018 presidential campaign.

Regarding the self-referential dimension, children relate to some adults' hopes, but they express the impossibility of influencing. They also identify themselves, in terms of socioeconomic level, as part of a broad sector that is named in the campaign formats, but not as childhood; in their narratives, they express a minority position due

DIAGRAM 1
OPERATIONALIZATION MODEL OF THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING OF CHILD AUDIENCES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION



Source: Prepared by the author.

to age, and in girls even more so due to gender. However, they do see themselves as political communication audiences, who build meanings through their interaction with other actors. Then, children's agency is evidenced in their relationship with the media, as well as their demand for this agency to be recognized and for the creation of spaces to participate in the exercise of their rights as stated in the proposals for cultural, active and differentiated citizenship (Gaitán-Muñoz, 2018; Padilla de la Torre, 2014). In addition, it is proposed that the capacities for comprehension, judgment, demand and action, which articulate the child audiences' agency of political communication, according to the findings, could contribute to this debate.

Regarding school and gender, it is possible that the willingness of boys to participate in public space and of girls in the private sphere could be linked to traditional gender roles. And it may be that the rejection of private school children to the proposals in favour of disadvantaged sectors could be linked to the desire not to lose a status quo; however, what they do want to change is the spaces for children's participation in electoral contexts, since for now they are only used as images. Likewise, the fact that children from private schools claim that campaigns do not fulfil a democratic function, could also be associated with more specific knowledge among that group.

In this way, the findings seem to show that the school is a source of information, although not necessarily a space for discussion, and that those who attend private schools seem to have more specialised knowledge about the actors and the hierarchy of political life. For this reason, it would be convenient to explore how children relate with other mediations (Orozco, 2006) to identify the role of the political trajectory, the conversations and the shared media practices in the child audiences' production of meaning process, as well as the relationship between family conditions and gender and type of school. In methodological terms, it is relevant to point out the need of confronting the common sense that revolves around the fact that "children don't know about politics" and of avoiding an approach that does not favor spontaneity, moving away from adult-centrist positions. Thus, recognizing and giving visibility to political communication's child audiences, would mark a distance from notions of childhood as

incomplete, awaiting the spontaneous emergence of adulthood as a guarantor of citizenship with civic commitment, built once and for all.

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