

“It’s the Economy, Stupid!” The Activation of Economic Voting in the 2006 Mexican Presidential Campaign.¹

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One of the most striking phenomena observed in the Mexican presidential race of 2006 was the way leftist challenger, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, lost his substantial lead over the incumbent party's candidate, Felipe Calderón. His decline has been attributed to tactical errors, such as not attending the first of two televised presidential debates, or engaging in constant mudslinging with President Vicente Fox. It has also been attributed to attacks on the former Mayor of Mexico City by Calderón, the PAN and its allies in the business community. This chapter offers a more formal explanation that does not conflict with, but rather supports the role of many of these campaign events; specifically, I argue that campaign discourse and events linked the economy to candidate preferences. Unlike in 2000, when Vicente Fox called voters for political change after 70 years of PRI rule, the PAN candidate in 2006 offered economic stability and the continuation of economic policies; he called for no change and voters answered.

The most basic evidence of economic voting in the 2006 presidential election is that the governing party's candidate benefited from favorable views about the economy, whereas the leftist challenger was heavily supported by voters who perceived poor economic performance. This is straightforward economic voting. My goal here is more ambitious: I attempt to link changes in voters' preferences to evaluations of economic conditions. Based on the first and third waves of the 2006 Mexico Panel Study conducted in October 2005 and July 2006, I argue that voters' assessments of the economy were activated during the campaigns, strengthening the relationship between favorable economic views and the PAN vote. This dynamic allowed Calderón to attract enough votes to win the most highly contested presidential race Mexico has had.

Theoretical expectations

The literature on economic voting has successfully linked individual opinions about the economy with vote choices (Fiorina 1981, Kinder and Kiewiet 1981), and actual macroeconomic behavior with election outcomes (Lewis-Beck 1988). According to Lewis-Beck, “[w]hat gives meaning to the foregoing statistical associations between economics and elections is the underlying belief that individual citizens react systematically to economic stimuli at the ballot box” (1988:30). As Alesina and Roubini argue, “voters like growth and dislike inflation and unemployment. They are retrospective: They vote in favor of the incumbent if the economy is doing well (low unemployment and inflation, high growth) during his term of office” (Alesina and Roubini 1999:19).

This “rational” behavior is likely to take place on two sides of the voting story. On the voters' side, voters tend to support an incumbent party when they perceive—or have benefited from—good economic performance. On the politicians' side, candidates mobilize support on the basis of economic performance. If the economy is doing well (many times as a result of government stimulation before elections), an incumbent party's politician would presumably seek to remind voters of recent economic achievements, such as financial stability, low inflation, low unemployment, and so on. If the economy is doing poorly, a challenger would have more incentives to mobilize support by priming

the government's economic failure. This represents a "relationship between politicians' opportunistic behavior and rational opportunistic voting" (Alesina and Roubini 1999:9).

My main argument is that the Calderón campaign mobilized political support focusing on economic issues, on one hand, and that voters who evaluated the economy positively responded favorably to Calderón's messages, on the other. As I will show below, the Calderón campaign worked, not because he convinced an increasing number of voters that the economy was doing well, but because he convinced voters who already thought so to cast a vote for him, not for López Obrador. If we consider the rational expectation of economic voting—that economically satisfied voters reward the incumbent party—as a theoretically expected predisposition among voters, campaigns effects related to economic reasoning are not necessarily about "persuasion", but about "activation". This means that voters who evaluate the economy favorably are simply called to vote for the incumbent party candidate and, as I will show later, Mexican voters under characteristics responded accordingly.

The concept of activation dates back to the studies of voting in the 1940s, when Lazarsfeld and his colleagues published *The People's Choice*. As they put it, "[p]olitical campaigns are important primarily because they *activate* latent predispositions" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944: 74). Using an activation model, Finkel argued that in the American presidential elections of 1984 and 1988, "campaigns served mainly to activate existing political predispositions and make them electorally relevant" (Finkel 1993:1). Later, Finkel and Schrott reported that "the dominant effects of the campaign on German voters [...] were the 'reinforcement' of earlier preferences and the 'activation' of latent vote dispositions..." (Finkel and Schrott 1995:349). More recently, Larry Bartels has elaborated on the differentiation between persuasion and activation: "Campaigns matter" he argues, "*because* they tend to produce congruence between fundamental political conditions and predispositions on one hand and vote intentions on the other. This supposition is supported by survey-based findings on political activation..." (Bartels 2006; italics from original text).

The notion of activation presupposes that, when a predisposition or belief is activated, it follows its "natural" or theoretically expected relationship with another variable, in this case, with candidate support. One obvious example would be a liberal voter that supports a liberal candidate after she had previously considered voting for a conservative one. Activation, not persuasion, is what sometimes explains the discrepancies between early standings of the candidates in the early polls and the final election results (Gelman and King 1993, Bartels 2006). Following this logic, a relevant story of the 2006 presidential race is about how voters who evaluated the economy in favorable ways increased their support for the incumbent party candidate during the campaign season, thereby reducing the early disadvantage of 10 to 15 points that he had in the polls.

The panel data shown in this chapter provide clear evidence of the increase in support for Calderón among economically positive voters (those who held favorable evaluations of the economy), from 35% in October 2005 to 57% in July 2006. But that

fact alone is not sufficient to make the argument for economic activation. It is also necessary to prove or show that, (1) there were objective economic conditions favorable enough for the PAN to pursue an economically oriented campaign (otherwise, such a campaign would be neither rational nor opportunistic, to use Alesina and Roubini's terms); (2) that the PAN campaign really attempted to activate economic voting (as expected in a rational opportunistic model); (3) that the increase in PAN support among economically optimistic voters is not a result of an increase in the proportion of the latter during the campaign (in other words, that an increase in support is observed in a proportionately constant group of voters and not a result of an increasing number of voters in that group); and (4) that the increase in support among economically optimistic voters corresponds to the incumbent party candidate but not to other opposition candidates (in which case, arguing in favor of activation would be nonsensical).

The following sections address these issues and provide the data and analysis that support the argument that economic voting activation in the 2006 presidential campaigns.

The economy, public opinion and voting

Despite overwhelming evidence that economic voting is a predictable pattern in advanced democracies, establishing a relationship between economics and election outcomes has not been an easy task in Mexico. For example, Magaloni (2006) found a positive but rather weak relationship between support for the dominant party and economic growth from the 1940s to 2000. Moreover, she argues that individual-level data from the late 1980s and 1990s show ambivalent results in typical economic voting, concluding that “a theory of retrospective voting does not adequately account either for support of an incumbent during recession or mediocre economic performance, as shown by Mexican voters between 1985 and 1994, or for voters turning against the incumbent despite an objective improvement of economic conditions, as Mexicans did in 1997 and 2000” (Magaloni 2006:85). The 2006 presidential election seems an exception to that ambivalent pattern. As shown elsewhere, economic voting did play a significant role in 2006 (Moreno 2006, 2007). And, as I will show here, campaign messages are very likely to have activated voters' economic reasoning.

During the Fox administration (2000-2006), Mexico's economy behaved in two very different ways. The first three years were characterized by null growth and increasing unemployment.² In contrast, from 2004 to 2006, economic growth resumed, formal employment rose, consumption of durable goods took off housing development peaked and, something new for most Mexican families, consumer credit flourished. In addition, skyrocketing international oil prices gave the Mexican government generous and unexpected revenues that it had not foreseen (Moreno 2007).

Public opinion surveys accurately reflect the country's economic slump and recovery in the 2000-2006 period. As growth in GDP approached zero in 2001, public opinion became increasingly pessimistic. Those who thought the economy had worsened in comparison to the previous year outnumbered those who thought it had improved (see

Figure 1). However, as the economy started to take off in 2004, public opinion became increasingly optimistic, mirroring the pattern of economic recovery with corresponding favorable evaluations about the economy.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

On Election Day, economic evaluations were strongly related to candidate support. According to national exit poll data gathered by newspaper *Reforma*'s on July 2, 2006, López Obrador carried most of the economically dissatisfied votes. About 47% and 58% of those who thought the national economy was somewhat worse or much worse than the previous year, respectively, voted for the PRD candidate (see Table 1). In contrast, Felipe Calderón only got 17% and 9% of the vote among those same groups. Nonetheless, the PAN candidate did superbly well among economically optimistic voters, attracting a clear majority of them: he got 74% of the vote among those who thought the economy was in much better shape compared to the previous year, and 58 % among those who said it was somewhat better off. López Obrador received 12% and 23% of the votes among those two groups, respectively. Calderón's ratio of victory over López Obrador was almost 7 to 1 among the most economically optimistic voters—who represented 9% of respondents in the exit poll—and almost 3 to 1 among the moderately optimistic ones, who were 24% of the sample. In total, economically optimistic voters represented 33% of the actual voting population in 2006, compared to 24% six years earlier—according to a similar national exit poll conducted by *Reforma* in 2000. Economically dissatisfied voters were 17%, down from 28% in the 2000 election. Previous work has confirmed that economic evaluations were one of the most significant explanatory variables of individual vote choice in 2006, coming second only to party identification (Moreno 2006).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Economic evaluations *per se* did not change significantly during the months of campaigns, as evidenced by the Mexico 2006 Panel Study (see Table 2). Positive evaluations of the national economy represented 45 and 42 percent in the first and third round of interviews (October 2005 and July 2006), respectively, whereas the proportion of positive evaluations about personal economic conditions were 32 and 30 percent.³ This variation indicates a slight deterioration of economic assessments, but it is not significant. The panel data show that views about the economy remained rather stable from October 2005 to July 2006.⁴ This means that the impact of the economy on the vote cannot be attributed to changes in the proportion of voters who expressed positive views about the economy; changes in political preferences took place despite the stability in perceptions about the country's economic conditions. In other words, the Calderón campaign did not convince voters that the economy was better off (although there were indeed improvements in the immediate months prior to the election); it only convinced those who thought so to vote for him (or not to vote for López Obrador).⁵

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

But who were the economically satisfied and dissatisfied voters? Was there any underlying socioeconomic basis of their satisfaction/dissatisfaction? The panel study shows that socioeconomic variables do not relate to economic evaluations as much as political identity variables do. For example, a composite index of socioeconomic status based on household equipment considering eight items (television, radio, cable TV, stove with oven, refrigerator, washer machine, automobile, and personal computer) does not show a significant relationship with economic evaluations. Neither do indicators of income, occupation, or benefits from social programs. In a multivariate model, age is the only demographic variable that moderately relates to economic views—the older the respondent, the more negative assessments of the economy he or she expresses—and education was statistically significant in the first round of interviews but not in the third round. Unlike the lack of explanatory power from the socio-demographic variables, party identification was a strong predictor of the respondents' economic evaluations: PAN identifiers expressed favorable views of the economy, whereas PRD identifiers provided negative evaluations (PRI identifiers did not show any significant relationship with views about the economy). This partisan bias of economic evaluations will require further research. Wlezien et. al. (1997) have suggested that economic perceptions are to some extent structured by vote choice, causing a significant endogeneity problem. But the fact that positive and negative views of the economy showed such a strong partisan component provides further evidence of activation of prior political predispositions. It is not just an economic reasoning that is activated during the course of a campaign, but partisan based economic reasoning.

The evidence shown here supports claims (1) and (3) stated in the preceding section, that (1) objective economic conditions were sufficiently favorable for the PAN to reasonably pursue an economically oriented campaign, and (3) that an increase in PAN support among economically optimistic voters is not a result of an increase in the proportion of the latter during the campaign. The following section will address claim (2) that the PAN campaign attempted to activate economic voting.

The PAN campaign: from values to economics

From March to June, 2006, the PAN presidential candidate centered his political campaign on economic issues, calling voters to support economic stability and the continuation of most of Fox's economic policies. Calderón asked voters not to vote for a leftist candidate that could jeopardize the economy, calling him a "danger to the country". He thus framed the election as a choice between future of economic stability and employment on one hand, and the return to a past of economic crisis and debt, on the other.

However, this was not always Calderón's central message. He had won the PAN caucuses of party members standing on issues of integrity and moral values. One of Calderón slogans in his primary campaign, "Clean hands", attempted to portray him as an honest man, as a rare Mexican politician with "courage and passion for Mexico". He drew the support of the conservative PAN followers and defeated President Fox's former

Interior Minister, Santiago Creel, who, according to most polls at the time, enjoyed broader support among the electorate as a whole. In a speech pronounced on October 23, 2005, after he clinched his party's presidential nomination, Calderón called his primary efforts "the campaign of principles and values, the campaign of firm hand and passion for Mexico" (PAN 2006:17). In another speech given when he accepted the presidential nomination, on December 4, 2005, Calderón referred to his as an alliance in defense of values, and he said that he would "continue basing his campaign on the strength of those values and ideas" (PAN 2006: 39). He kept a series of conservative messages during the first few weeks of the general election campaign, in January and February, 2006, when he was trailing López Obrador by 10 to 15 points in the polls. In a nationally televised interview with Televisa network's main news anchor, Joaquín López-Dóriga, Calderón took a conservative stand on diverse social issues, such as abortion and contraception.

Messages based on moral issues and family values did not seem to attract additional support for the PAN candidate in the general election campaign. In a sudden shift of strategy, Calderón publicly announced that his campaign messages were mistaken, and that his campaign staff was making him say and do things he did not mean. This made more than one political commentator think that Calderón's campaign was doomed; it seemed just a matter of time for López Obrador to be elected President. Nonetheless, driven by Calderón's new messages, the economy rose as a crucial issue in the following months, changing the campaign dynamics and, ultimately, the election result.

The PAN candidate's new strategy focused on economic stability and jobs. On March 14, 2006, Calderón officially launched what his team called a second phase of the campaign. The following part of his speech clearly illustrates the shift of strategy from values to economics:

"Principles and values do not change. Principles and values have to do precisely with whom we are; what changes is the circumstances, the moments,... it is important always to be willing to revise and to change strategies, and that is what we are doing. [...] We Mexicans want a better living, ... [...] We can and we will have a better living through employment, that is why I am going to be the president of employment in our country. [...] For us to have a better living we need jobs, not debt; we need employment, not economic crisis; and we need a president that knows how to lead Mexico into the future. I will lead Mexico into the future." (PAN 2006:150-151).⁶

The continuation of Fox's economic policies also became a central feature of the new strategy—messages that Fox reinforced during the campaign, thereby causing a political controversy about his role on the election. López Obrador was portrayed as a populist that would increase Mexico's debt, and plunge Mexico back to economic crises. The PAN campaign framed the election with the idea that Mexico had achieved financial stability and economic growth, and that voting for López Obrador was not worth the risk.

At first, the label “a danger to Mexico” seemed to have political implications: López Obrador was portrayed as an intolerant and undemocratic man. In a political rally he told President Fox “cállate cha-cha-la-ca”, an episode that was taped and aired in PAN ads over and over. Another PAN television ad compared the leftist candidate to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and asked viewers “Is this the type of authoritarian we want to elect?” As the campaigns developed, it became clearer that labeling López Obrador a “danger to the country” had more economic implications than political ones, and that economic stability, not democracy, was at stake if he won the election. The 2006 presidential race was ultimately about economic conditions and economic policies. And campaign messages contributed significantly to mobilize political support, not by convincing Mexicans that the economy was better off, but by convincing those who thought it was better to vote for the PAN candidate. Messages appealing to economic conservatism worked for the PAN.

Let us briefly review the contents of some PAN television ads. This one aired before the first presidential debate:⁷

“VOICE IN OFF: López Obrador made an economic mess in the Federal District, he achieved the highest unemployment rate and the last place in economic growth in the nation. No wonder he doesn’t want to debate! But, how do you create better jobs and salaries? Watch the debate, Felipe Calderón will tell you.

The following ad relates López Obrador to debt:

“VOICE IN OFF: López Obrador only knows how to increase our debt.
“A YOUNG WOMAN SPEAKS: Because of him, our families in the Federal District owe more than 23 thousand pesos each.
“FELIPE CALDERÓN’S VOICE: We Mexicans want peaceful progress, and I know how [to get it]: creating jobs, not debt; bringing investment about, not economic crisis.

Calderón’s offer of economic stability was usually accompanied by direct or indirect attacks on his main opponent. This dichotomy is illustrated in the following Calderón statement, asking what Mexicans would pass onto their children: “Are we going to give them a stable economy where they can find jobs when they grow up, or an economy in crisis like in the past, full of debts?”⁸

President Fox continuously joined the strategy, praising the state of the economy, calling for continuity, and criticizing the leftist candidate without mentioning his name. “We Mexicans will make sure”, Fox said in mid May, “that we choose a good president, the best one for things to keep going, so that everything good that there is in the country continues. [...] Populism, demagoguery, is a cheat; disordered public finances are a cheat; corruption is a cheat”.⁹ Later that same month, Fox stated that “it is indispensable to maintain budgetary discipline, to avoid spending one more cent that is not part of our income; we do not want to increase the country’s debt. [...] Mexico has left its difficult years, now we have solid economic growth with stability and no inflation.”¹⁰ References

to populism evoked López Obrador's policies of cash transfers to the poor and the elderly in Mexico City. On May 25, President Fox said in a public speech that "there is no better social policy than that of creating jobs, and no better way to fight poverty than generating wealth. That is why demagoguery and populism do not help the betterment of people."¹¹ The paramount economic argument made by President Fox took place on June 10, 2006, reminding voters that the economy was doing well: "We have 24 or 25 days until Election Day, and nobody would have thought that the economy was growing, that we were creating jobs, and that this is the best moment the economy has had in the last five years".¹²

The PAN framed the election, as Calderón succinctly put it, as a choice "between economic stability and an unstoppable spiral of economic crisis."¹³ A striking fact is that López Obrador did not react to this strategy based on economic issues. His efforts to focus on the poor ("Primero los pobres") throughout the campaign—even at the expense of the rich and privileged—did not help him maintain his early advantage in the polls. This was surprising in a country where 40 million people live under conditions of poverty, and I will return to this in the following section. López Obrador's reactions centered on critical exchanges with President Fox and denigrating the PAN candidate, to whom he referred as a "pelele", a nobody. During the most intense period of attacks, in May, when polls started to show a closing gap between the two candidates, López Obrador would argue that he was leading the race by 10 points. López Obrador attacked Calderón directly in the second debate, calling attention to allegedly questionable contracts that the government had granted his brother in law's private company, some of which were presumably granted during Calderón's tenure as Secretary of Energy.

In sum, Calderón's call for stability and his attacks on the leftist candidate as a danger to it were effective because the Mexican economy had performed relatively well in the second half of the Fox administration. Indeed, there were objective reasons to support Calderón's campaign claims of economic continuity. Importantly, economic factors were not as politically influential before the campaigns as they were on Election Day. This means that voters were mobilized to a great extent by economic arguments. Apparently, López Obrador's image as a "danger to the country" resonated with Mexicans who valued economic stability. Many of them had recently used their credit to purchase durable goods, automobiles, or housing. Mortgages became a new commodity in the Mexican electoral market, and mortgage holders were likely to cast an economically conservative vote in 2006. But they were not the only ones. Calderón obtained a disproportionate share of the vote among Mexicans who expressed positive evaluations of economic conditions, both, national and personal, regardless of direct economic benefit.

Changes in candidate support by economic evaluations

Observing campaign effects is not an easy task, and it may require the measurement of several information-related variables such as the level of media exposure, selective attention to messages and analysis of "reception gaps" on persuasion (Zaller 1996). In

this chapter I have argued that economic voting in the 2006 Mexican presidential race resembles more an activation effect than a persuasion one. Evidence provided by the Mexico 2006 Panel Study allows us to show in a relatively simple way changes in political preferences by positive and negative views about the economy. While the latter remained stable throughout the campaign, the political preferences linked with each economic view varied significantly. Voters who evaluated the economy favorably increased their support for Calderón and reduced it for López Obrador. In contrast, voters who evaluated the economy negatively increased their support for the leftist candidate.

In October 2005, when the first panel wave was conducted, there was already a positive relationship between economic assessments and support for Calderón, but it was rather moderate compared to the relationship observed by the end of the campaign. Only 6% of those who expressed negative views of the economy in October 2005 supported Calderón, a proportion that increased to 14% among those who perceived no changes in the economy, and to 35% among those who perceived economic improvement during the Fox administration. This positive relationship was remarkably stronger by July 2006, as shown by the post-election round of interviews. Support for Calderón among economic pessimists remained low, at 7%, but self-reported vote for the PAN candidate had grown substantially among the other two categories: 24% among those who perceived no economic change, 57% among those who perceived better economic conditions (see Figure 2). The 29-point gap between economically satisfied and economically dissatisfied voters observed in October 2005 increased to a 50-point gap by July 2006. In addition, Calderón also gained support (a net 10-point favorable shift) among those who did not perceive economic changes. This finding suggests that Calderón attracted mainly voters who perceived economic improvement, but also many who did not perceive economic change at all. Although López Obrador obtained more votes than Calderón in that segment, the PRD candidate was not able to mobilize more votes in his favor during the campaign amongst them. The net gain for Calderón was, then, observed among economically satisfied and economically indifferent voters.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Support for López Obrador behaved in an analogous way. The panel study confirms a negative relationship of the leftist vote and positive economic evaluations before the campaigns and an even stronger negative relationship after the election (see Figure 2). Support for López Obrador increased significantly, from 49% to 64%, among those respondents who thought the country's economy had deteriorated during the Fox administration. In contrast, support for the leftist candidate dropped moderately among those who perceived better economic conditions, from 26% to 20%. Despite this drop, López Obrador was able to maintain about a fifth of the vote among economically satisfied voters. The support gap between economically satisfied and dissatisfied voters was 23 points in October 2005, but it increased to 44 points by July. The net shift in the gap was 21 points, the same that Calderón had. These data show that the months of campaigns tilted economically dissatisfied support for López Obrador and economically satisfied support for Calderón almost in the same rate, as if it was a zero-sum game. But,

most importantly, this shift in preferences corresponds to theoretical expectations about economic voting and provides evidence of activation of politically relevant voters' predispositions.

These changes in candidate support broken down by economic evaluations are based on the total national sample of the panel study, considering partisan and non-partisan respondents. As mentioned earlier, party identification is one of the main predictors of economic evaluations in this study, having a much more significant effect on them than income, occupation and even than benefits from government programs, variables that surprisingly have little influence on economic evaluations. It would be expected that the activation of economic reasoning during the campaign was particularly strong among partisans. But, what about independents? Hillygus and Jackman (2003) suggest that “responsiveness to campaign events is greatest among Independents, undecided voters, and ‘mismatched partisans’” (2003:583). The panel data also show that the non-partisan electorate actually responded in a similar fashion to the economic frames of the campaign as the electorate at large, and even economically satisfied independents swung from left to right in their voting preference. A reproduction of Figure 2 only considering independents (not shown here for reasons of space), indicates that support for López Obrador increased 10 points (from 51% to 61%, from October 2005 to July 2006) among economically dissatisfied voters; it remained stable among those who perceived no economic change; and it dropped 11 points (from 44% to 35%) among the economically satisfied voters. In contrast, Calderón's vote increased 20 points among the latter (from 29% to 49%) and 12 points among voters who perceived neither economic improvement nor deterioration (from 22% to 30%). The PAN candidate only lost 2 points among the economically dissatisfied independent voters (16% to 14%).

The most revealing finding in this analysis of independents is that Calderón was able to reverse an early disadvantage among economically satisfied, non-partisan, voters. Whereas the PAN candidate was ahead of López Obrador among the economically satisfied electorate in October 2005, he was nonetheless trailing the leftist candidate among independents who evaluated the economy favorably. That same month, the PAN candidate had a 15-point disadvantage among independent voters who had positive views of the economy. By July, however, there were more of the latter supporting Calderón than López Obrador, with a positive 14-point difference. This data show that economic reasoning was activated—and observed—even when taking partisan biases out. The other aspect observed among independent voters is that Calderón closed a disadvantage gap among those who did not perceive changes in the economic situation, from 26 points in October to 16 points in July.

Candidate images also changed in significant ways from one round of interviews to another. Holding economic evaluations constant on wave 1 of the panel study (October 2005), feeling thermometer differentials show significant changes favorable to Felipe Calderón in general, but most notably among those who evaluated the economy in positive terms (see Figure 3). Regardless of how voters evaluated the economy, López Obrador was significantly more popular than Calderón in the first round of interviews—although economically satisfied respondents were almost indifferent towards both of

them. By May and July, 2006, Calderón had reduced the disadvantage gap among economically dissatisfied respondents, and actually led in opinion scores among those who perceived improvement or no change. The data shown in Figure 3 indicate that changes in candidate image controlling for economic evaluations are significant, even when holding the latter constant to the first round of interviews. In other words, this data are confirming evidence that economically satisfied individuals became increasingly supportive of Calderón throughout the campaign, and less likely to back López Obrador on Election Day.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

One final piece of evidence about economic reasoning is related issue ownership, to how some issues were attributed to candidates throughout the campaign. López Obrador centered his campaign messages on fighting poverty, whereas Calderón, as I have illustrated, emphasized economic stability and jobs. The panel study asked respondents in its three waves of interviews which issues each candidate was paying more attention to. In October 2005 and May 2006, the percent of respondent who mentioned that López Obrador focused on poverty was only 5% and 10%, respectively, and it doubled to 21% on July (see Figure 4). The relatively low percentages that resulted in the first two rounds of interviews indicate that, despite the leftist candidate's efforts to send a message across about the country's poor, only a small proportion of voters actually said that he was mostly paying attention to that particular issue. In May, a similar proportion of voters who perceived López Obrador paying attention to poverty also perceived him paying attention to unemployment (10%). There was no clear issue ownership in this pre-election wave of interviews. Respondents made a much clearer connection between López Obrador and the poverty issue in the post-election round, when 21% of them said that it was the PRD candidate's most important campaign topic.

Calderón's ties to the unemployment issue were weak when perceptions were measured in the first round of interviews (only 2% of respondents said in October 2005 that the PAN candidate was paying the most attention to unemployment), but they grew stronger in the second and third rounds (when 23% and 29% made that same connection, respectively). Interestingly, the proportion of voters who related the PAN candidate to the poverty issue remained low, around 2% or 3% in the three waves. Calderón was simply not associated with that issue, but he owned the field in regards to unemployment. The data on issue ownership provide some evidence of what Bartels (2006) calls the "priming of economic perceptions". Not only did Calderón's association with fighting unemployment rise during the campaigns as a reflection of his economically oriented messages, but also did attacks on López Obrador have a negative result, preventing voters to attribute the leftist candidate competence on fighting poverty, especially before the election took place. According to Bartels, "[o]ccasionally, campaign events do seem to prime an electoral consideration where one party or the other enjoys a marked advantage in the distribution of opinion in the electorate" (2006). As it appears, Calderón's image of economic competence grew important during the campaign. To what extent this is a result of priming and, moreover, how this explains the election outcome, are questions that remain unsolved. Based on the American National Election Studies from 1980 to

2000, Bartels argues that “[f]or the most part, campaign priming seems to be a matter of academic interest to political psychologists, not a major factor in determining the outcome of a presidential election” (2006). However, the fact that these findings from Mexico derive from panel data, not from cross-section samples, increases the evidence for economic voting activation. The results shown in this chapter indicate that (1) support for Calderón increased during the campaign, (2) that such increase was more significantly higher among economically satisfied voters, and (3) that Calderón was attributed the issue of unemployment more clearly than Lopez Obrador the issue of poverty. The first two findings support a thesis of campaign activation, while the third finding points towards a consideration of priming.

Discussion

Economic voting mattered in the 2006 presidential election in a way that it had not previously mattered before. In this chapter I argued that, besides a clear evidence of straightforward economic voting in 2006, economic reasoning was activated during the presidential campaigns. Activation, not persuasion, seems to drive changes in candidate preferences observed through the Mexico 2006 panel study. Support for incumbent increased significantly among economically satisfied voters, and support for the leftist forerunner candidate increased among economically dissatisfied ones. Such changes took place despite the fact that economic assessments about the country’s economy remained stable during the campaigns. Calderón’s campaign did focus on economic issues, and his messages seemed to have worked not because he convinced voters that the economy was doing well, but because he attracted the votes of those who already thought so and prevented them from supporting López Obrador. Framing the election as a choice between economic stability on one hand, and economic crisis and debt on the other was a strong activation cue for Mexicans had favorable views about the economy and had benefited from low inflation, housing development, a significant increase in durable goods and, perhaps more importantly, the flourishing of financial credits as never before.

The panel data used in this volume provide clear evidence of the increase in support for Calderón among economically satisfied voters, but I also illustrated additional reasons to make an argument on economic activation more convincing. I showed that (1) there were objective economic conditions that supported a PAN economically oriented campaign; (2) that the PAN campaign really attempted to activate economic voting by focusing on economic issues; (3) that the increase in PAN support among economically optimistic voters is not a result of an increase in the proportion of the latter during the campaign; and (4) that the increase in support among economically optimistic voters corresponds only to the incumbent party candidate and not to other opposition candidates.

What does it mean that economic voting mattered and that economic reasoning was successfully activated in the 2006 Mexican presidential election? The following are only some reflections on a potentially wide number of implications. First, it shows that an environment of increasing electoral competition in Mexico, and the fading of a regime cleavage that placed economic concerns in a secondary role for many years (Moreno

1999) has brought economic issues back to the center of political conflict. We may be able to see more economically oriented campaigns that address fiscal and redistribution issues, as well as the development of rational opportunistic patterns of voting behavior. Secondly, if Mexican voters are more economically retrospective than they were before, this may have some implications for party responsiveness to electoral choices, and we may be observing an increasing pattern of electoral accountability based on economic results. Thirdly, some observers of Mexican politics have suggested that campaigns are way too long and too costly, but evidence from other democracies over time shows that voters are able to learn about the country's economic conditions in longer campaigns than in shorter ones (Stevenson and Vavreck 2000). This finding has an immediate dilemma for the Mexico's young democracy: should Mexicans reduce campaign length and costs in a time when voters are starting to connect their political preferences with government performance, thereby making the party system potentially more responsive? It seems that, as of now, and if voter learning takes place in longer campaigns, they may be a tool for government responsiveness. Finally, economic voting divides parties and candidates on policy proposals to address valence issues, such as poverty, unemployment, economic growth. If so, as the 2006 presidential election was significantly ideological, with the left voting for López Obrador and the right for Calderón, we may be observing more ideologically and programmatically oriented campaigns in the near future. That will probably redefine the type of political coalitions that we have hitherto observed in the past.

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Figure 1. The Economy and Public Opinion in Mexico, 2000-2006.

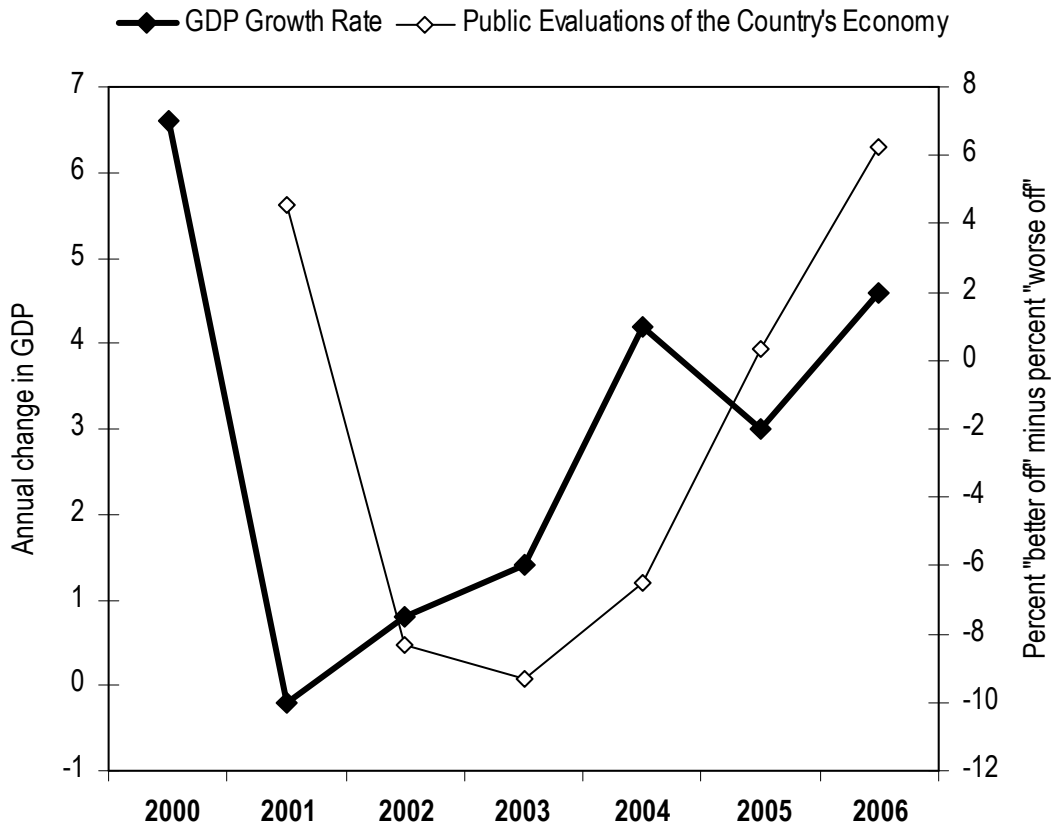


Table 1. Retrospective Economic Evaluations and Presidential Vote Choice in 2006.

	López Obrador	<i>Vote choice</i> Madrazo	Calderón
<i>National economy compared to previous year</i>	%	%	%
Much better	12	11	74
Somewhat better	23	16	58
About the same	41	25	30
Somewhat worse	47	29	17
Much worse	58	29	9
 <i>Personal economy compared to previous year</i>			
Much better	14	12	70
Somewhat better	22	16	58
About the same	41	24	31
Somewhat worse	49	30	15
Much worse	55	32	8

Source: *Reforma*, National Exit Poll, July 2, 2006; n=5,515.

Table 2. Retrospective Economic Evaluations in Two Waves of the Panel Study.

	October 2005	July 2006
<i>National economy since Fox in office</i>		
Much better	10	8
Somewhat better	35	34
About the same	39	45
Somewhat worse	7	5
Much worse	6	5
Don't know	3	3
 <i>Personal economy since Fox in office</i>		
Much better	6	5
Somewhat better	25	25
About the same	53	58
Somewhat worse	8	6
Much worse	6	5
Don't know	2	1

Source: Mexico 2006 Panel Study; waves 1 (n=1,600) and 3 (n=1,067).

Figure 2. The Activation of Economic Voting.

Support for Felipe Calderón and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) by economic evaluations in waves 1 and 3 of the panel study.

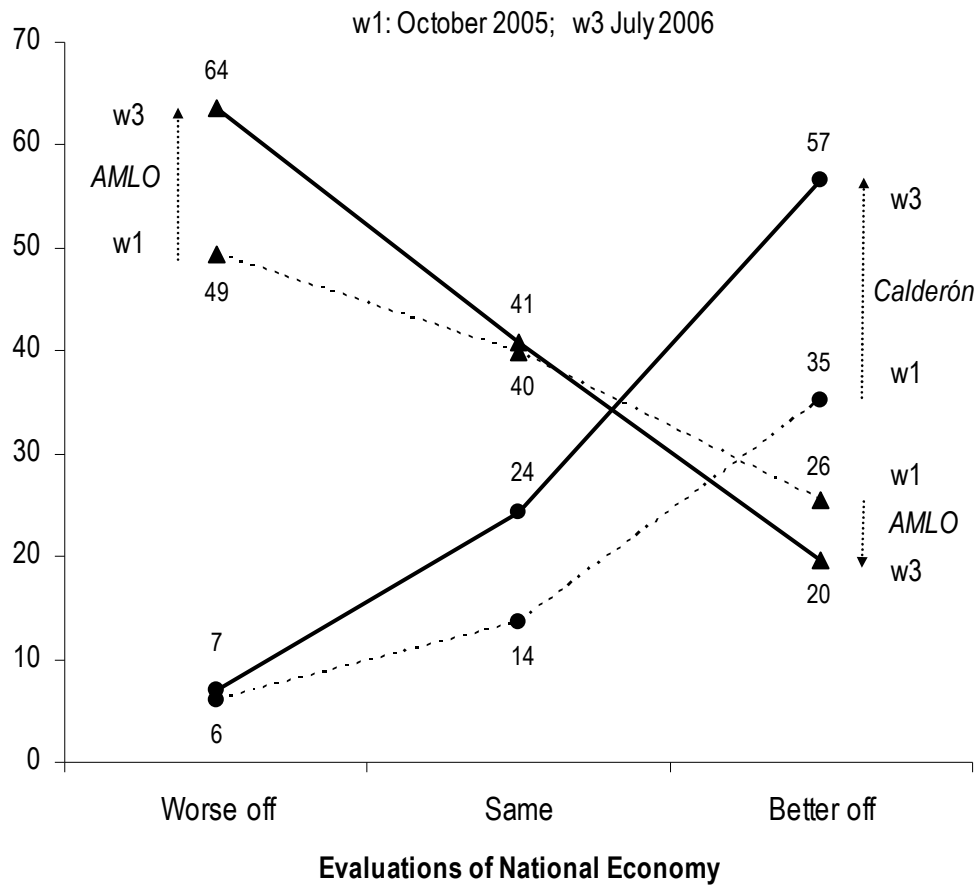


Figure 3. Changes in Candidate Image.

Feeling thermometer differentials between Calderón (FCH) and López Obradro (AMLO) in three waves of the panel study.

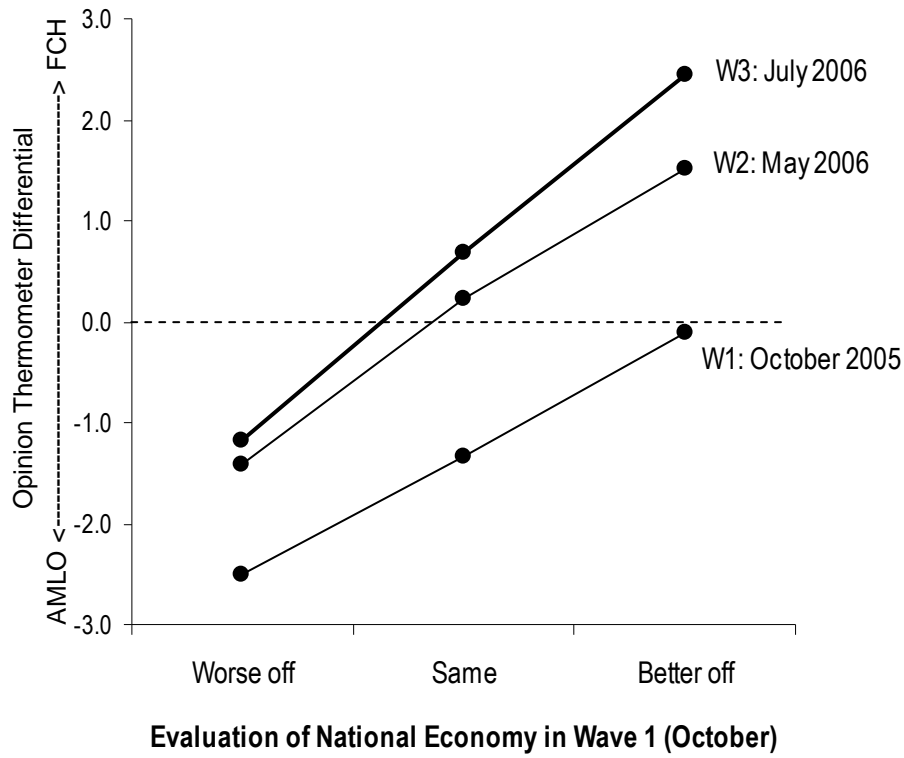
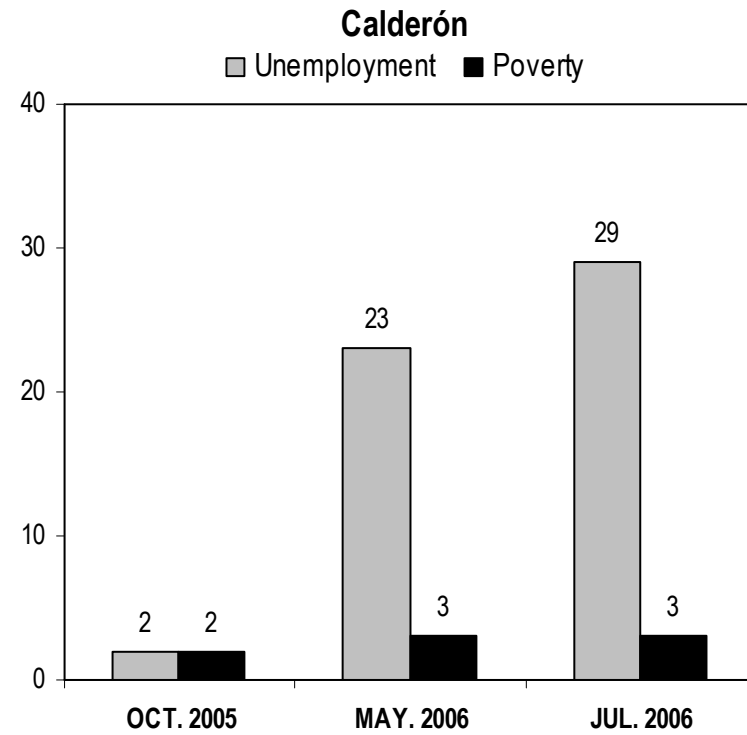
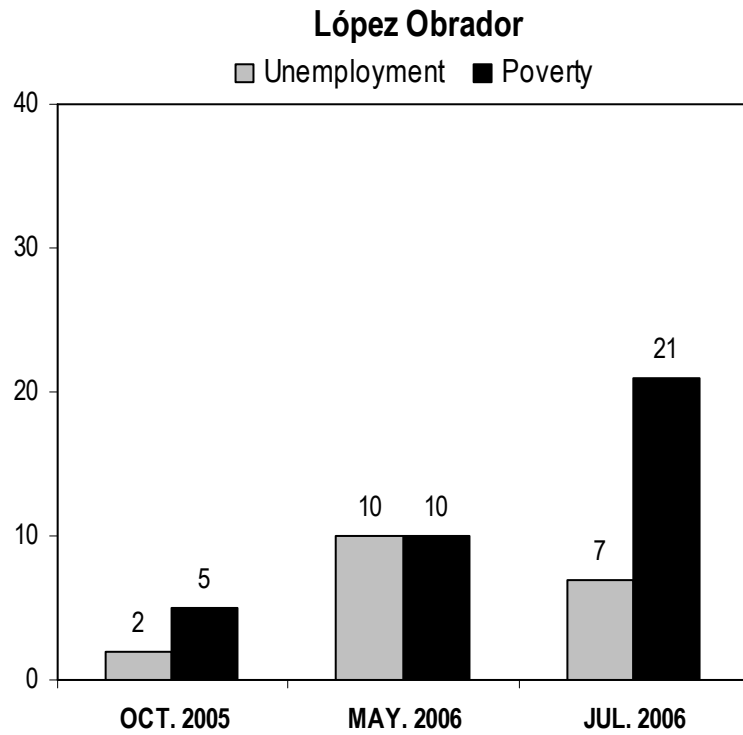


Figure 4. Issue Ownership.

What issue is each presidential candidate paying more attention to? (Percent)



¹ The author thanks Arturo Alvarado, Wayne Cornelius, Jorge Domínguez, Federico Estévez, Alberto Gómez, Nydia Iglesias, Chappell Lawson, and Gabriel Lenz, and Alejandra Sota for their comments, and María Teresa Martínez, for her skillful research assistance.

² A Survey of Mexico by *The Economist* reports a loss of 700,000 jobs, mainly in the *maquila* sector (Nov. 18th, 2006, pp. 9).

³ Variations between the panel study and the exit poll may not only reflect a different composition of the voting population and the electorate at large, but, more importantly, a different timeframe set in the question. The exit poll asked respondents how they considered economic conditions compared to the previous year, whereas the panel study asked about economic conditions during the Fox government. This latter question brings 42% of positive economic evaluations in July 2006, compared to 33% that resulted in the exit poll that same year.

⁴ A question on the economy similar to these was not included in the second round of interviews, conducted in May 2006.

⁵ The aggregate stability in panel study does not allow us to see individual-level variations, which are always expected in a panel design. In this case, 63% of respondents in waves 1 and 3 (October 2005 and July 2006), remained stable in their economic evaluations, 18% improved his or her opinion of the economy, and 19% worsened their judgment. The latter two cancel each other out, resulting in a rather stable aggregate measure.

⁶ From then on, Calderón's campaign constantly referred to a better living ("Para que vivamos mejor").

⁷ These and other collection of political ads for the 2006 presidential election can be seen in www.youtube.com.

⁸ Quoted in *Reforma*, May 1, 2006.

⁹ Quoted in *Reforma*, May 16, 2006.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Reforma*, June 3, 2006.

¹¹ Quoted in *Reforma*, May 25, 2006.

¹² Quoted in *Reforma*, June 10, 2006.

¹³ Quoted in *El Universal*, May 3, 2006