Public Policies within Mexico´S Fourth Transformation (4T) and Their Communication Strategies: Influence on University Citizenship (Mexico, 2018–2024)

José Leonardo Vázquez Islas*

Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, México

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

With unprecedented popular support, Andrés Manuel López Obrador's rise to power as president of Mexico brought with it a vision of national transformation known as the "Fourth Transformation" (4T), which would renew the country by ending corruption and impunity, implementing financial austerity, abolishing neoliberalism, and prioritizing the poor. This research analyzes the influence of political discourse and outcomes on university students, offering a comprehensive view of the political phenomenon with an emphasis on its narrative, political strategies and links with media and society, leading to widespread citizen acceptance. Drawing on political science, communication, and populism, it provides an analysis of the transformation influenced by a polarizing leader who left indelible marks on Mexican history through communication strategies and public policies implemented in social programs to reach citizens. It uses a mixed methodology to recover personal and family perceptions of students from the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo about the political phenomenon. It provides a context for the communication process and populism as a line of research, offering tools for understanding the link between political discourse, citizen perception, and the transformation experienced. The results obtained will be useful for future research, providing political scientists, communicators, political analysts, and public policymakers, as well as young higher education students, with information and methodologies to deepen their understanding of the work of government administration.

Keywords: Social welfare, communication strategies, politics, populism

INTRODUCTION

For much of the 20th century, Mexico lived under a hegemonic regime led by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which held political power for over 70 years. Subsequently, stronger political opposition emerged. Andrés Manuel López Obrador began his political career as a state leader of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), denouncing electoral irregularities and developing a discourse centered on defending vulnerable and marginalized sectors of society. Over time, AMLO transformed into an alternative political figure who could represent change in the country. With him, the political discourse began to shift, and although he never managed to convince the entire nation with his political and communication practices before or during his time in power, at the end of his term, a large percentage of citizens applauded his populist policies, which polarized the country.

With unprecedented popular support, AMLO's rise to power as president of Mexico brought with it a vision of national transformation known as the "Fourth Transformation" (4T), which aimed to renew the country by ending corruption and impunity, implementing financial austerity, abolishing neoliberalism, and prioritizing the poor.

The "*Juntos Haremos Historia*" (Together We Will Make History) alliance, led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), achieved a resounding victory in the 2018-2024 Mexican presidential election, garnering more votes than the combined total of the other three presidential candidates. This victory was reflected in 53%

of the vote, a majority never before seen since the establishment of a competitive electoral system in Mexico (Prud'Homme, 2020).

With unprecedented popular support, AMLO's rise to power brought with it a vision of national transformation known as the "Fourth Transformation" (4T), which represents a regime change that aimed to renew the country by ending corruption and impunity, managing the public budget with austerity, abolishing neoliberalism, and prioritizing the poor (Martínez Espinoza, 2021).

This research focuses on analyzing the influence of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's political discourse on Mexican university students between 2018 and 2024, emphasizing his political narrative, communication style, political strategies, and relationship with the media. This approach demonstrates his widespread acceptance among half of Mexican citizens, offering a comprehensive view of the political phenomenon known as the Fourth Transformation.

Consequently, this study is approached within the framework of political science and communication, seeking to provide analytical elements that allow the reader to better understand the transformation the country has undergone under the influence of a highly polarizing political party and leader, who has nonetheless left an indelible mark on Mexico's contemporary history through the communication strategies chosen to reach citizens and the public policy mechanisms implemented through so-called social programs. Thus, using a mixed-methods approach, the perceptions of students from the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo were gathered. This research enriches the academic debate on the communication process followed by populism in Mexico, the link between political discourse, citizen perception, and the transformation experienced by the country's institutions.

Conceptual Framework

For much of the 20th century, Mexico lived under a hegemonic regime led by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which concentrated political power for over 70 years. Subsequently, stronger political opposition emerged. AMLO began his career as a political figure, starting as the state leader of the PRD, denouncing electoral irregularities and beginning to build a discourse centered on defending vulnerable or marginalized sectors.

Over time, AMLO began to be seen as an alternative political figure who could represent change within the country. With him, political discourse began to shift, and although neither before nor during his time in power did he manage to convince the entire country with his political and communication practices, at the end of his term, a large percentage of citizens applauded his decisions that polarized the country through populist policies

Populism is defined as the "political tendency that claims to pay special attention to the problems of the popular classes," and authors like Hermet (2003) focus more on its anti-political character and its controversial promise of being able to satisfy popular needs immediately and without revolution, championing the marginalized through polarization between the people and the elite. Canovan (2006) defines it as a social phenomenon with a set of political practices and strategies that vary enormously according to the historical and cultural context. For Mudde (2014), it is a "thin ideology" with two dominant interpretations: the first focusing on a highly emotional and simplistic discourse; the second describing opportunistic policies aimed at pleasing the people and thus "buying" their support.

Theories of Political Communication

Political communication has been extensively studied from numerous theoretical perspectives that demonstrate how the media influence the construction of power and social perception. McQuail and Deuze (2020), in their review of "Mass Communication Theory," emphasize that mass media not only inform but also evoke a construction of social reality through the selection and prioritization of topics. Habermas (2006), for his part, criticizes contemporary societies with broad access to information for trivializing public debate and engaging in media spectacles devoid of any substance—what he calls politainment.

Political Discourse

It is relevant to incorporate the tools proposed by Van Dijk (2016) from critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly to examine how discourse reflects, reproduces, or challenges the abuse of power and social inequality within political and social contexts. We have also observed assertions such as those made by Du and Chen (2022), who address political discourse as an element with ideological, persuasive, and power-related functions, primarily influenced by the sociopolitical context. Political discourse can also be understood as the language primarily used by governments, parties, and politicians within an institutional framework (Randour et al., 2020), making it a key component of the media, especially in the way journalistic values and political narratives intertwine (Wang et al., 2022). Chilton and Schäffner (2022) define political discourse as the set of linguistic practices that reflect and construct power relations, used by various political actors to legitimize, persuade, or even negotiate. Through this, it shapes social reality, translating into the definition of problems and proposed solutions, with the main objective of justifying political decisions.

Government and Social Policy

The profound change that Mexican democracy has undergone, following the governmental decision-making lines highlighted by Curzio and Gutiérrez (2020), originated in the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. This government focused on actions that had the greatest impact on the Mexican economy, with an emphasis on benefiting the most vulnerable population. It would suggest that if a substantial portion of public resources were redirected to direct transfers to the population living in poverty, the vulnerability of indigenous populations could be eliminated, first and foremost.

Following studies conducted by Olvera (2025), it is identified that "governments primarily highlight the millions of senior citizens receiving pensions, the millions of students benefiting from scholarships, and the thousands of young people earning a monthly minimum wage through the "*Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*" (Youth Building the Future) program," to mention the main social programs, or rather, those with seemingly the largest beneficiary base. Therefore, it is not possible to dismiss the support provided to farmers or small producers, senior citizens receiving medical care, or migrants who have obtained the Paisano Card.

In Pursuit of Legitimacy Through Political Communication

One object of study in this field follows the origin and personality of political contenders, the role of mass media and the journalists who follow their every move, and finally, the content that defined the attributes of their messages before, during, and after the campaign.

Throughout his administration, AMLO was the sole protagonist in the area of communication regarding government actions, overshadowing and sometimes even correcting his collaborators, as he personally assumed the task of informing the public through the daily communication exercise colloquially known as the "morning press conference," broadcast nationwide. There, he achieved his goal of manipulating the facts, contradicting the journalists selected to attend, and responding with the famous phrase that he "had other data".

In this context, a tense and challenging relationship developed between AMLO and the media, which presented unexplained and contradictory data in the public sphere. Thus, distrust and confrontation with the press, intellectuals, and certain sectors of society were constant features of AMLO's criticism of traditional media, limiting the plurality of voices in public debate.

In this way, following the insightful analysis formulated by Corral (2024), the communication strategy designed by President AMLO, which aimed to expand the public sphere, has the following components: a) Morning press conferences, direct and regular communication; b) Use of social media, with brief messages and various announcements; c) Anti-media rhetoric, labeling journalists and their editorials as conservatives and opponents of the government; d) Transformation narrative: communication focused on the "Fourth Transformation" (4T).

Objectives

This research aims to analyze the political and social impact of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government in Mexico, based on campaign promises, implemented strategies, and political decisions during his administration (2018-2024), in order to identify the elements that comprise the Fourth Transformation. The specific objectives are to identify AMLO's symbolic and discursive elements in the narrative constructed between 2006 and 2018; to understand the main social programs implemented during his term and their impact; and to analyze public perception of AMLO and the social effects of his government.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological design used in this study is exploratory-descriptive, following the hermeneutic paradigm primarily used for interpreting the meaning of social phenomena. The qualitative approach also considers it very important to maintain a multidisciplinary paradigm, incorporating administrative and organizational theories, analyzing national and international reports, and studying the structure of operation and interaction among specific actors.

This study employs an analytical method with a descriptive orientation for the systematic identification of data related to the information obtained regarding dimensions and criteria for describing human phenomena within the social, political, economic, and cultural context that the Mexican population faced with the arrival of a new democratic scenario. Therefore, it utilizes various methods, such as content analysis of national press publications, documentary analysis, case studies, and other historical-hermeneutical approaches.

This methodological approach emphasizes the review and processing of bibliographic, documentary, and periodical sources. By incorporating the opinions and perceptions of those involved in the processes, this approach strengthens the researcher's objective of describing phenomena, situations, contexts, and events to specify the properties and characteristics of each area. Here, the qualitative paradigm, as Denzin and Lincoln (2021) affirmed, opens an opportunity area for the researcher, since qualitative research intersects disciplines, areas, and objects of study.

Thus, data collection and analysis methods useful for this qualitative approach are utilized, allowing for the gathering and analysis of the perceptions of selected individuals through surveys and/or semi-structured interviews. This approach also enables the identification of influences and trends based on the responses obtained. As Merlino (2009) stated, its application allows for more objective analysis, taking into account the researcher's perspective on the data obtained. This aligns with the commitment to the legitimacy of investigating social reality, a commitment that Bericat (1998) anticipated as essential to the object of study within social research. For this study, the opinions of 85 participants were obtained, divided into two groups: 50% were sixth-to eighth-semester students in the economic-administrative sciences area, ranging in age from 22 to 27; the other 50% were faculty members between 40 and 55 years old. All participants belonged to the Autonomous University of the State of Hidalgo.

So, following this way, we return to the approach of seeking to answer questions that attempt to understand "how" a phenomenon has been experienced or developed, in order to comprehend the world from the perspective of the people involved in the study. This involves obtaining more in-depth and detailed information for understanding and approaching the issues raised, their dynamic structure, the reasons that govern their behavior, and thus explaining complex and multifaceted phenomena from the perspective of the actors who interact within them. This aligns with Vázquez's (2022) assertion that qualitative methods are associated with understanding, context, exploration, discovery, and inductive logic.

Therefore, carefully considering how to achieve the effectiveness of qualitative data analysis is fundamental in research where diverse disciplines converge, including the social sciences, political science in interaction with education, economics, business management, sociology, and public health, among others. This multidisciplinary approach has characterized the emerging field of public problems, as Méndez notes in 2020.

RESULTS

It has been identified that in the last eight years there has been a greater interest in communication regarding political issues, as shown in Figure 1, without this implying greater affinity for or membership in any specific party or organization. Rather, it fosters critical participation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Citizen interest in national politics.
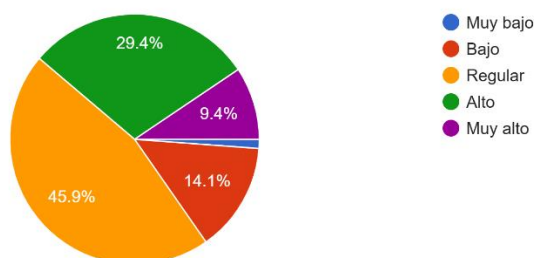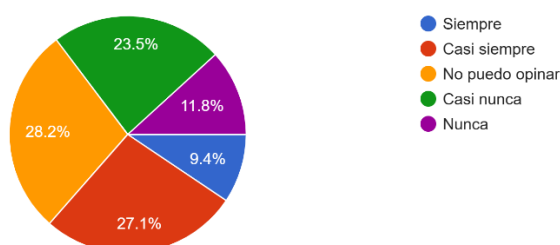

Source: Author's self elaboration, 2025.

*Question translation: What is your interest level in national politics ?

The data reveals that high and very high levels of interest in national politics account for 38.8% of opinions, while the moderate level has the highest percentage at 45.9%. This indicates that national events disseminated through political communication have captured the attention of university students, allowing them to form opinions on various topics related to government actions, public policies, and the actors involved.

Therefore, stemming from the interest generated by political life, the study participants expressed opinions that allow us to identify the influence of the elements used in the narrative constructed during the period between 2018 and 2024 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Perception of the communication strategies of the 4T.

Source: Author's self-elaboration, 2025.

Question translation: What´s your opinion about communication strategies to convince people about benefits to the country.

The data obtained in this area reflects significant acceptance of the communication strategies by 59% of those interviewed. These strategies consistently included the "Morning Press Conference," where the Mexican

president personally engaged in a semi-dialogue to report on social programs and progress on major infrastructure projects, as well as to announce various actions that would be carried out periodically.

It is also important to mention that a central theme in AMLO's political communication was related to the social programs, particularly those involving resource transfers for young people (scholarships), temporary employment (Transforming with Youth), and "Welfare" pensions (for those over 60), among others. These programs are given priority because they represent monthly payments for beneficiaries, allowing the president's administration to repeatedly emphasize the benefits being delivered and the achievements in combating poverty compared to other indicators (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Perception of the impact of social programs.
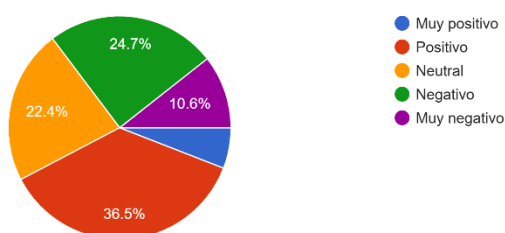
Source: Author's self elaboration, 2025.

Question translation: Do you think that social programs (scholarships or pensions) have had positive or negative impact?

Here it can be seen that 44% of the responses express acceptance of social programs in their scholarship or pension forms. It is also noteworthy that 22% maintain a neutral opinion. Thus, it can be inferred that 35% have a negative opinion associated with the subsequent electoral use of these programs, given the evidence in society that beneficiaries are pressured to vote for AMLO's party in various elections. Participants state that they agree with the economic benefit and assistance received by many households, but they criticize the subsequent electoral pressure.

On the same topic, there are significant opinions regarding the efficiency and transparency with which the federal government manages social programs (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Perception of the efficiency and transparency of social programs.
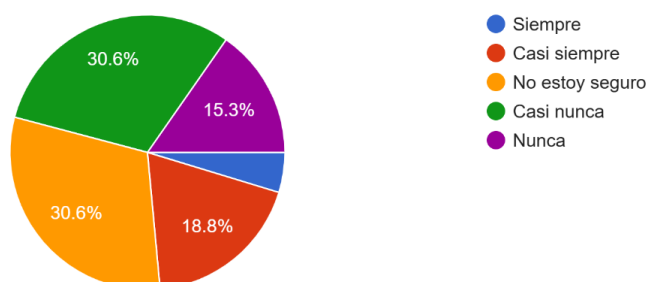
Source: Author's self elaboration, 2025.

Question translation: Opinions about efficiency and transparency in social programs.

Participants who provided their opinions in the research expressed disappointment with the way social programs are managed, with 45% reporting experiences of inefficiency and a lack of transparency in the resources transferred to beneficiaries (problems such as delays in initiating transfers, lack of accountability regarding the beneficiary registry and the amounts spent, and insufficient oversight of funds delivered to beneficiaries' family members when they collect payments with a power of attorney, among others).

In accordance with the above, information is presented on the aspects that participants indicated in an open-ended question regarding the greatest achievement of the AMLO administration (Table 1).

Table 1. Main positive and negative opinions on the results of AMLO's government.

	Positive opinions	Negative opinions
Interview Results	Financial support for senior citizens became widespread	Corruption has not been eradicated and impunity for tax crimes persists
	Poverty reduction was achieved	Failed strategies were implemented against organized crime
	The channels and means for greater communication with citizens were expanded	Lavish and very expensive constructions were built without any benefit to the population
	Maintain measures to increase the country's economic stability	The country's debt increased

Source: Author's self-elaboration, 2025.

CONCLUSIONS

The power of social narrative is clearly exemplified in the communication strategy of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Through the social programs implemented during López Obrador's six-year term, disseminated in the morning press conferences ("*Mañaneras*") as part of his 2018-2024 political communication strategy, not only were economic dynamics transformed, but also political narratives. By placing the people at the center of the conversation and the president as their direct interlocutor, a communicative relationship based on symbolic reciprocity was forged: "I support you, you support me." This logic, while effective in terms of emotional connection, poses challenges democratic institutions, as it risks personalizing the State and reducing public policy to individual gestures.

Undoubtedly, social programs were indeed used as a social communication strategy. Not exclusively, nor in a manipulative way in all cases, but certainly as part of a narrative that sought to legitimize the political project of the Fourth Transformation. The key lies in recognizing that communication is not just dissemination, but the construction of meaning. And in that sense, the AMLO administration was able to transform social programs into narratives of hope, justice, and transformation.

Thus, the political communication that sought to exemplify the national change represented by the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador constitutes an attempt to reconfigure Mexican social policy from a perspective of social justice and equity. Its analysis requires considering both its ideological foundations and its practical effects on the lives of millions of people.

The institution through which the resources of social programs are distributed directly to each of the beneficiaries, called "*Banco del Bienestar*", has 119 new branches in the 84 municipalities of the State of

Hidalgo, thus having 100% coverage; even, 49 branches are in municipalities that do not have the presence of any other bank.

Although the declaration that the programs and resources are public policies implemented for the benefit of the population is always required, through the statement "These programs are public, independent of any political party. Their use for purposes other than those established in the programs is prohibited," the entire population knows for certain that the resources are granted with a clientelistic orientation, which in electoral processes will serve to compel beneficiaries to go to the polls and vote for the party in power. This has happened historically since the creation of social programs, it happens today, and it will happen tomorrow… The question of whether social programs were used as a communication strategy does not necessarily imply criticism. Every government communicates its actions, and in contexts of high inequality, it makes its support visible for excluded sectors, which can be a legitimate way to build trust. However, when communication becomes propaganda, that is, a tool to reinforce the cult of personality or to condition votes, ethical boundaries are crossed.

In AMLO's case, the line between institutional and political communication was blurred. The morning press conferences, visits to communities, social media posts, and official advertisements constructed a narrative in which the president appeared as the main benefactor. This strategy was effective: according to various polls, social programs were one of the factors that most contributed to presidential approval, even during times of crisis.

It would be interesting to follow this line of current research and explore new avenues to compare whether presidential approval in other administrations was also related to the distribution of resources through social programs; it would also be interesting to open a debate based on a comprehensive analysis of the Fourth Transformation (4T) as a project that marked a significant shift in Mexican politics and that has continued under the presidential term of Claudia Sheinbaum (2024-2030).

On the other hand, considering the attributes of this political project, it is important to analyze the characterization of its communication strategies and their impact on solving the social, economic and political problems that the population has expected as a result of the political change achieved in this century.

Ethical considerations.

Ethical Approval: This research do have the approval of university members to include their opinions about the questions related in the interviews.

Conflict of Interest: This research have no potential conflicts of interest.

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