COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Submitted
April 22nd, 2019
Approved
January 8th, 2020

© 2020
Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
doi: 10.15581/003.33.2.155-169
www.communication-society.com

2020 – Vol. 33(2)
pp. 155-169

How to cite this article:
Calzado, M. (2020). Election campaign audiences and urban security: Citizens and elections promises during a mediatized political campaign (Argentina 2015). *Communication & Society, 33*(2), 155-169.

Election campaign audiences and urban security: Citizens and elections promises during a mediatized political campaign (Argentina 2015)

Abstract

This article analyses the relations between citizens and the electoral campaign regarding insecurity/lack of public safety during the presidential election of 2015. Crime was one of the major concerns of the country that year, so much so that four of the six candidates produced specific election advertising spots on the subject. Within this context, the article asks: What does insecurity mean for citizens? Do they support the promises of the campaign? How do they interpret audio-visual materials about insecurity? The aim is to explore how those viewers interpreted campaign publicity on insecurity/crime during the presidential election of 2015 and to reflect on their role in the processes of political mediatization. Analyzing six focal groups, we were able to conclude that: i. People experience worry about crime in the city and distrust not only the police but the legal system and political representatives; ii. They do not criticize the candidates' promises, but they can unveil the true or false intentions of election advertising; iii. They distinguish between election advertising aimed at an emotional response (false) and those more logical or rational (closer to the truth).

Keywords

Viewers, crime, insecurity, presidential campaigns, political communication, focus groups.

1. Introduction

During an election campaign, candidates include topics of social interest in political discussion to put questions to the voters and compete for positions in areas that affect everyday lives. For this reason, as explained by Benoit: "Elections are inherently and essentially communicative in nature" (2007, p. xii). Despite the central position of the political field in the agenda's definition, election topics are also shaped by the media and by social concerns. Political communication is, therefore, the result of the confrontation of different discourses, "of information, politics, and public opinion" (Wolton, 1998, p. 111).

In the Argentine presidential election of 2015, the central topic of discussion resulting from this confrontation was the political and economic aftermath of the Nestor Kirchner and

Cristina Fernández governments, and speculation about the incoming government[1]. However, the electoral campaign included a second topic, which, until this time, had been seldom used in a presidential campaign in Argentina: public safety and crime (Fleitas, 2014). These topics had been identified as severe public concerns in Argentina (Kosovsky, 2007) and in other Latin American democracies since the mid-'90s (Del Olmo, 2000; Kessler, 2011; Lagos & Dammert, 2012). By 2015 crime was considered the most critical issue by the Argentine public (Latinobarómetro, 2015), leading to results showing 25% of the residents of Buenos Aires City thought that candidates should prioritize public safety in order to win the presidency, even above the issues of health and education[2]. Subsequently, four presidential candidates (Mauricio Macri –Cambiemos–; Daniel Scioli –Frente para la Victoria, FPV–; Sergio Massa –Unidos por una Nueva Alternativa, UNA–; and Adolfo Rodríguez Sáa –Compromiso Federal, CF– produced publicity spots and intervened in the media and social networks on the topic. The other two candidates, Margarita Stolbizer (Frente Progresistas) and Nicolás del Caño (Frente de Izquierda) were also obliged to take a position on the subject.

The electoral publicity spots communicated definitions and suggestions on urban crime and insecurity. However, we ask: What does insecurity mean to citizens? Do citizens agree with the promises of the candidates? What role does personal experience have in the interpretation of security promises? We aim to advance in conceptual terms on the question of the public's place in the political mediatization process.

Based on the above questions, our general aim is to explore how viewers interpreted the audio-visual publicity spots related to urban crime produced by 2015 Presidential Election candidates. Specifically, we look at how citizens perceived the topic, how they interpreted the election proposals, and the role of personal experience in their perception. From an interpretative perspective, the question is not about the effects of the political message, but how voters work out campaign contents for themselves. From this perspective, we show the results of the studies of six focus groups in the City of Buenos Aires in October 2015.

In this frame, our main suggestion indicates that in recent decades, candidates communicate with citizens using audiovisual and digital language, knowing that the receptors are exposed to political mediatization. Viewers receive political mediatization while at the same time deciphering the campaign messages in their way. Secondly, although the candidates highlighted crime to attract voters, we found that voters arrived at different interpretations of similar election promises, conclusions often related to their political and socio-economic experiences.

In the first part of this article, we look at the discussion on political communication and the studies of viewers, outlining the main concepts used. In the second part, we show our methodological approach, and in the third part, we present the results of our study on the relations between candidates, electoral viewers and, political publicity on crime. In the conclusions, we define the limits of our study and establish lines of reflection for looking at electoral viewers as a category for analysis in contemporary mediatized democracies.

2. Political communication and audiences

The study of viewers' and citizens' characteristics is often thought of as being synonymous with statistical definitions. The analysis of the direct or limited effects of quantitative methods has found consensus in the field of political communication (Gitlin, 1978; Nimmo & Sanders, 1981). Questionnaires and analysis of content form the basis of these studies to understand how citizens react to political advertising. Quantitative researchers have often attempted to understand the impact of the media and political advertising in public debate during election campaigns (Bennett & Iyengar, 2010; Karpf *et al.*, 2015; Mc Combs & Shaw, 1972). In recent

[1] In 2003 Néstor Kirchner was elected president with a new approach, which continued under Cristina Fernández (2007) and her re-election (2011-2015).
[2] According to a survey of 400 cases, which formed part of this research in Buenos Aires City 2015.

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years, these include studies of *datafication* (van Dijck, 2014) as a mechanism of misinformation which violate the viewer's rights to communication and threatens democracy (Newman, 2018).

Quantitative approaches produce consistent results with those about media impact on politics and citizens (Geers & Bos, 2017; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Wells & Dudash, 2007; Tresch & Feddersen, 2019; Sørensen, 2019) and how campaigns shape the perceptions of voters (Bartels, 1996; Johann *et al.*, 2018; Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1948; Lengauer & Johann, 2013). Along these lines are also studies that show how political advertising can change the attitude of citizens (Huber & Arceneaux, 2007) or shape party preferences (Jennings & Wlezien, 2016). Despite the consistency of these studies, we recognize the lack of academic unanimity as to whether political advertising is able to define how people vote or able to change the opinion of viewers (Witschge, 2014).

Our concern is not about the effects, but about the political and cultural experience of the voter during mediatized campaigns. As Ridout & Franz say: "Campaign ads do matter, but their impact is largely contingent," since their influence is mediated at the very least by the type of advertising, the context of the campaign, and the specificity of the individual viewer. (2011, p. 5). Our results show that the political position of the citizen is central to understand the process of how political advertising is received.

Moreover, the quantitative research on effects produced a volume of data, but there remains a lack of definition in approaches as to "how" and "why" (Mokhtar, 2017). As Karpf and others explain: "The reigning consensus in political communication research has marginalized qualitative methods, resulting in an unnecessary and counterproductive narrowing of our ability to understand central aspects of political communication and how they are changing." (2015, p. 1890). In this context, we seek to contribute some tools to the field of political communication looking at the social meaning of political advertising for voters, as well as contribute to research on determined and determining experiences of viewers.

Since the media "has become the new *sin qua non* of the quotidian" (Silverstone, 2007, p. 5), marketing has taken a central place in research on election processes (Verón, 1994). In our mediatized societies, "where social practices [...] are transformed because the media exists" (Verón, 2001, p. 41), citizens change their ways of connecting to politics. For some authors, this situation presents a "worrying prophesy" in which "instrumental rationalism tends to become installed rather than the production of socially relevant interpretations, and a collective of citizens becomes reduced to a collective of receptive consumers, 'worked on,' among other things, by political marketing" (Verón, 1994, p. 31)[3].

In this way, the relationship between citizen and mediatized politics creates an impact on democracy and for Manin (1977) transforms it into "audience democracy," a space in which media consumption is an integral part of the civic experience. When "the electorate appears, above all as an audience" (Manin, 1997, p. 223), the literature tends to assume either very critical or moderate positions.

Firstly, the critical perspectives consider that the electoral process is subsumed under advertising consumption, a situation that produces passive, uninformed, and easily manipulated citizens. Before the emergence of social networks, Sartori (1977) showed how the influence of television made politics more emotional and passionate; the weight of the image above the rationality of the world threatened the construction of robust democracies with thinking and participative citizens. This perspective re-emerges in the studies of post-truth, in which objective and rational discussion give way to sensationalism created by false

[3] Communication studies are evaluating these changes using the concept of mediatization as "a double-sided development in which the media emerge as semi-autonomous institutions in society at the same time as they become integrated into the very fabric of human interaction in various social institutions like politics, business or family" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 30). Livingston (2019) claims that researchers who want to emphasize the power of the media are "fascinated" by this notion, while the continuity of studies on daily experiences and meanings related to the media are weakened.

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information produced by and for the media (Marzal Felici & Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Sánchez Galicia, 2018).

From another epistemological matrix, the critical perspective also includes the paradigm of limited effects, such as the work of Iyengar, who claims: "As the postindustrial era has progressed, the role of grass roots political organization and traditional partisan infrastructure has waned, whereas the candidates turned to the electronic media as the chief mean of communicating with the electorate," and added that "the role of the ordinary citizen diminished from that of occasional foot soldier and activist to passive spectator" (1997, p. 144). This approach looks at an individual inability to escape from the power of definition of discussion topics or the setting of the political agenda (such as crime news in our study). To summarize, critical perspectives share the concern that mediatization converts citizens into uncritical spectators, and as a consequence, capacities of the voters and the democratic system are weakened.

Moderate perspectives, on the other hand, claim that the media improves citizens' capacities in present-day democracies. For the most optimistic, the more information citizens possess, the more knowledge about the candidates, the more interest is generated in electoral participation, and the democratic process is improved (Kinder & Polfrery, 1993; Wells & Dudash, 2007; Toka, 2008). Within this perspective are those who claim that social networks can give depth to political debates, even to the point of sustaining that "nowadays democracy is played out on Twitter" (Cansino, 2018). The volume of information increases the value of citizenship, citizens having more ability to give meaning to the world, and evaluate social problems. In the words of Page y Shapiro: "The American public, as a collectivity, holds a number of real, stable, and sensible opinions about public policy and that these opinions develop and change in a reasonable fashion, responding to changing circumstances and to new information" (1992, p. 1). This moderate view looks at how a rational public opinion evaluates campaign issues and defines its vote with more knowledge than in the past[4].

Despite their differences, both critical and moderate perspectives agree that, faced with changes in the communication ecosystem, a revision of research tools is needed and that extreme positions should be abandoned. Along these lines, some authors have looked into how life experiences form part of voting decisions. Coleman (2013) explains that election strategies are increasingly built upon such para-social foundations. Communications are directed towards *you*, the voter, as a singular bundle of experiences, rather than a previously imagined mass electorate, addressable via the industrial transmission of messages to "everyone" (p. 215). Moreover, political communication studies incorporate life experiences and emotions of the voters as a means of understanding their relation with mediatized politics. Within this matrix, we take Silverstone's definition of the media (2007) as regards the general texture of life experience, and we consider that citizens' life experiences are a fundamental part of establishing meaning in political communication. Silverstone notes that "our question obliges us to investigate the role of the media in shaping experience as well as the inverse: the role of experience in the shaping of the media" (2007, p. 26). Within the experience, we find influences and actions, structural settings, and the collective reshaping of meaning. Livingstone follows along similar lines: "People in a mediated, perhaps mediatized, increasingly datafied age—that is the task in front of us" (2019, p. 180).

Among these discussions, we study the relation between the media and subjects. "The TV message is treated as a complex sign, in which a preferred reading has been inscribed, but which retains the potential, if decoded in a manner different from the way in which it has been encoded, of communicating a different meaning. The message is thus a structured polysemy" (Morley, 1999, p. 129). Along these lines, we use an interpretive paradigm to study

[4] The moderate viewpoint could also include the theory of "two steep flow," which sees opinion leaders as intermediaries between the media and citizens. (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

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"the role of language and symbols; daily communication; the interpretation of actions and emphasis placed on the process of making sense of the inter-action" (Morley, 1999, p. 126).

In line with this approach, we do not separate citizens from audiences or the public from the private. Livingstone (2005) explains that to polarize the range between trivial /passive audiences and "public" active/critical audiences only simplifies the problem. In a hybrid situation, audiences can easily become "public" by discussing topics proposed by the media relating to the public space. Livingstone's position claims that "Hence the activities of publics cannot be divorced, analytically or empirically, from those of private individuals." He goes on to clarify that: "Since these activities –which include thinking, feeling, talking, interacting and acting– occur in a thoroughly mediated environment, they also cannot be divorced from the activities of people as audiences"(2005, p. 12). In this situation, the difference between audiences and citizens is no longer absolute, and the hybrid nature of public and private invades the public sphere.

Citizens are therefore not necessarily determined by political messages (as indicated by the negative viewpoint) but rather acquire new characteristics when faced with mediatized electoral processes. Our concern centers on citizen's use of technology and political contents; on the mediatization of politics in the light of the social context in which it takes place. We then propose the idea of electoral audiences to look at how mediatized politics communicate with citizens and also to look at how voters read and interpret campaign proposals from their socio-political experiences. The problem is not whether these interpretations take place in the public or private sphere since election discussions cross this division. From our perspective, therefore, electoral audiences refer to a collective subject which sees, listens and debates political messages in public and private spaces based on their experiences (collective and individual, public and private) and from their position in the social structure (political, social, economic and cultural).

3. Methodology

This study seeks to understand the meanings citizens give to electoral audiovisual advertising. We, therefore, use a qualitative procedure of data collection and processing, guided by the interpretative perspective of cultural studies. We use focus groups to find out how citizens interpret electoral messages and the position of audiences in the articulation between public and private spaces (Ibáñez, 1979). The experiential focus group method, an approach that observes the natural or "given" attitudes of a social group (Fern, 2001), involves a series of limitations and virtues.

In terms of limitations, the focus groups involve the risk of not including information on the audiences' natural contexts. As Morley (1996) explains, in different places (for example, at home or work), people may have different interpretations of the same material. However as the author makes clear, these difficulties are part of the "opportunity cost" of every investigation: "All methodological questions in the end have to be pragmatic and determined according to the resources available and the precise type of data needed to respond to specific questions" (p. 30).

In terms of virtues, focus groups allow an approach to find out "how" and "why" (Jarvis, 2011) based on specific questions on specific topics to capture a collective viewpoint (Denzin & Ryan, 2007). It also permits a large number of interviews over a short time (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For our study, it would have been impossible to work with another qualitative tool (individual interviews or ethnography) given the limited time margin. That is why we prioritize data collection at the precise moment of the election campaign when voters define their priority topics and establish and present the meaning of their electoral choice to others. Listening to people discussing public insecurity, we recognized how they gave meaning to this social problem and, at the same time, we discovered how they positioned themselves as regards political messages in the run-up to the election.

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To guide this study, we took decisions related to the research questions and objectives. These definitions functioned as structuring rules to permit open flexibility in fieldwork circumstances (Valles, 1997), forming guidelines to respond to both general and specific questions (Petracci, 2004). Firstly, we defined the frame of the task and object: we performed interviews from 21st to 23rd October 2015, just a few days before the first round of voting for the presidential election on 25th October. To ensure the neutrality of the discussions, the focus group meetings were held in the center of the city, not in the University (where the wide diffusion of political advertising could have included other unfamiliar elements). We then decided on six groups of eight voters each, in meetings of one hour, which were recorded audio-visually. The constituents of each group corresponded to the percentage of votes of each political party in the primary elections of August 2015[5]. The main categorizing variable was the voting intention of the participant in the first round of presidential election (which was generally similar to those of the primary election); the secondary variables were to establish a plurality of sex, age, and socio-economic class. In this way, we established two groups of Frente Para la Victoria (FPV), two of Cambiemos, one of UNA, and one group of the remaining political parties.

We thought carefully about the recruitment of the sample groups, the risks involved, and the need for the autonomy of the recruiter (Valles, 1997). We also thought the groups' meetings should take place during the election campaign when it is more natural for political discussion to occur in groups, and previous decisions could provide a format for responses. We decided to use a recruiter who usually works in market research, not political research, and established as a rigorous condition for inclusion in the study that none of the participants had taken part in any electoral surveys.

The groups were coordinated by a moderator, presenting the questions, and facilitating the discussion without interfering in any way with the responses (Fern, 2001). We also included two observers to register non-verbal interaction. We used guidelines to encourage interest and interaction within the specific context of the election and the viewing of a total of eight advertising spots on crime/security. Through these spots, we were able to record reactions to ordinary, everyday audiovisual material and the discussions which take place in private and public in the context of an election campaign.

We placed the responses in three categories: i. Voters perspective (VP) on insecurity/crime; ii. VP on the candidates' proposals on security; iii. VP on election advertising about security. The responses were analyzed using an interpretative approach (Morley, 1996) and discourse analysis tools (Hall, 1992). After we established the regularities in the discourses, we identified the participants' positions regarding election promises, identification with the topic of security, and their closeness or distance to the advertising proposals; these elements form the three results of our study.

4. Results

4.1. *Common Concerns*

Was security considered a problem by voters in 2015? Before responding to this first question (Q1), it is worth noting that the election was characterized by a sharp polarization between those who sympathized or condemned the national government in power, to the point where the symbol of a "social divide" had been installed (Natanson, 2019). Despite this divide, what voters had in common was the belief, parallel to concerns about the economy, that security was a central theme in the election of the new president. At the beginning of each group, and without the intervention of the moderator, the participants identified security as one of their major concerns. "I think the topic of security is what we have to deal with most," indicated one voter emphasizing personal experience with street crime. The feeling of insecurity

[5] Scioli (38,67%); Macri (30,12%); Massa (20, 57%); Stolbizer (3, 47%); del Caño (3,25%); and Rodríguez Saá (2,09%).

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(Kessler, 2011) expressed was not so much fear of becoming a victim, but rather the concern that a tendency which had been increasing sporadically since the '90s would continue[6].

The initial reaction of the groups was similar to the general diagnosis of the period since this was the first time, 2015, that security formed a central axis in a presidential election. In fact, according to Latinobarómetro (2015)[7] Argentinians considered the crime as the most significant public problem (39%), followed by the economy (31%). These statistics were reproduced as feelings during the interviews: "Security is what bothers me most, based on my own and friends' experiences in recent years" (a UNA voter). According to the participants, Buenos Aires had become a more violent city in recent decades, claiming that "we were a lot safer before" because "the criminals are a different bunch now" (FPV sympathizer). The time difference between feeling safe and unsafe was most noticeable at the political poles. For the FPV voters, insecurity had increased from the mid 90's when the government of Carlos Menem (1989-1999) implemented a series of neo-liberal policies transforming the social and economic structure (Pegoraro, 2002). For the Cambiemos followers, on the other hand, insecurity had worsened under the governments of Néstor Kirchner y Cristina Fernández: "The way I see things, it increased when Kirchner started," analyzed one Cambiemos voter. Those who were not sympathizers of either of the main parties had more varied opinions, including those who associated a more secure past with the time of the military dictatorship (1976-1983), the government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989), or the Menem period of government.

The followers of FPV and Cambiemos both considered the lack of education and drug consumption as "directly related" causes of the problem. Those who thought that neoliberal policies produced violence felt that public education measures were fundamental. Those who considered that the situation worsened during the Kirchner and Fernández governments also underlined the role of education: "People are free when they are educated" (Cambiemos voter). The symbolic dimension of education allows for a critique of the potential role of the state in attempts to resolve the problem. There was broad agreement that drug consumption and drug trafficking aggravated the complexities of the problem. A Cambiemos voter noted: "It seems that crime goes hand in hand with drugs more than with hunger." A FPV sympathizer confirmed: "Before they used to say that delinquents had some kind of code, but now it is more about drugs [...] it makes crime more violent."

In terms of institutional responsibility, opinions pointed to the Justice system as responsible for feelings of insecurity: "We need legal precedents," claimed a Cambiemos voter. A Massa sympathizer claimed that "the Justice system is totally out of control." The political class, in general, was also seen as responsible: "Insecurity is a business, politicians need it [...], they manage many gangs," added another Cambiemos participant. Followers of parties opposed to FPV agreed in their criticism of the political sector: "Politicians are in their private neighborhoods, they don't care, they are not going to be robbed, some are even leaders of gangs, they don't live the insecurity of citizens in the street" (Cambiemos). The security forces were also marked as responsible. "When I see the police, I think they are watching me when I leave my house so they can go and rob me" (FPV voter). Some participants related this mistrust to the lack of respect for the police in Argentina: "In any other part of the world they would be afraid of the police, but here they just treat them as idiots" (FPV voter). One Cambiemos voter went as far as to say that: "In a cross-fire between five criminals and five police officers, the ideal result is ten deaths." This general lack of trust of the institutions associated with crime is reflected in the data of Latinobarómetro: during this period, 69% of those interviewed in Argentina showed little or no confidence in the Government Executive,

[6] Insecurity is a historical, cultural concept that defines the margins of tolerable violence (Castel 2004). In the case of this study, insecurity reemerged in 2015 campaign as a dimension of the intolerable from the point of view of crime (safety of persons and goods).

[7] Latinobarómetro is an organization that performs surveys on problems perceived as most urgent in 18 countries of Latin America with approximately 20 thousand citizens.

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66% in the Legislature, 71% in the Judiciary and 65% in the Police. Citizens feel insecure not only due to a threatening environment but also due to the passive role of those who should protect them.

Within this context of lack of confidence, those interviewed agreed that candidates should explain what they are going to do about insecurity. The main topic of discussion was a diagnosis of danger in the city; specific political solutions were secondary. So, the question of "how" to intervene was not central, while the "what" and "why" took the central place, alongside the conviction that security must be a fundamental point in the next President's thinking and intervention. In summary, the results of our first question show a wide consensus among the participants, not only on the reality of public insecurity, but also as regards the impunity of those who represent them and who are supposed to protect them. Participants tended to focus on a diagnosis of the problem rather than to suggest possible solutions, which they left to their representatives (Table1). Therefore, the fear of crime and the lack of confidence in state institutions can be seen across participants of all political persuasions.

Table 1

Table 1 (Questions 1 and 2). Consensus and Disagreement

(Q1). Consensus → **based on experience**

Feelings — of urban insecurity
of institutional impunity

(Q2). Disagreement → **Rational**

Different evaluation of similar proposals on public security measures

Electoral audiences (pathos + logo)
Reveal advertising aims on insecurity.

Source: Own elaboration. Analysis of focus groups.

4.2. *Different reactions*

The consensus across followers of various political parties changes when faced with the second discussion question (Q2): What do citizens think about the election promises? This question allows us to analyze how electoral audiences are shaped. We found that even though insecurity was a significant concern by all political persuasions in 2015, sharing the belief that it should be a campaign issue and an important item on the agenda of the future president, the reaction to election promises was not lineal. In fact, the proposals of the three major candidates were quite similar (more police patrols, surveillance cameras, changes to penal law), but the reactions to the political campaign spots varied depending on the support or opposition to each party: participants used similar arguments to position themselves for or against election promises (Table 1). This would imply that rather than criticize new proposals on crime prevention, voters proceeded to interpret the real or misleading intention of the adverts: "Regardless of what the propaganda says, I think we all agree there's a lack of public safety," stressed one FPV follower. Voters, as electoral audiences, assume that election promises are misleading constructions on a topic which candidates should treat with care.

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According to Labarrière (2001, p. 10), "the style used by people's assemblies [...] drawn in perspective (*skiography*): the larger the quantity of spectators, the further away one is from a clear point of vision; the precise details are also superfluous." He explains: "To convince, not based on facts, but on a misleading appearance; the discourse would be more demonstrative from an emotional point of view, rather than from a logical viewpoint" Labarrière (2001, p. 10). Passions are what move people to make judgments and "persuasion depends on the willingness of the listeners when they are emotionally moved by a discourse; because we do not make the same judgments when sad as when we are happy, or when we love as when we hate" (Aristotle, 1933, p. 177).

However, nowadays, election audiences recognize certain misleading or false political visuals and audios. When they interpreted adverts about security, participants alternated between an understanding from an emotional dimension (*pathos*) and the search for a logical and informative dimension (*logos*). Experiences, both in terms of emotion and information, color the way of seeing and listening to political adverts: it was the direct or indirect experience of crime that differentiated voters' judgments. Spots can intervene in voters' feelings of fear and hence persuade, but to have personally experienced danger generates a contrast between the candidates' attempt to convince emotionally and the way that voters heard. Three FPV voters analyzed the spots in the following way:

> Participant 1: It all looks beautiful.
>
> Participant 2: Political spots always solve everything.
>
> Participant 1: Did you see how they filmed the aerial view of the security forces lined up, it's like for me it feels like they're preparing for something.
>
> Participant 3: They transmit a sensation to you, that's it.
>
> Participant 1: At least I feel I'm being trained for what's to come...like that music there, taking me into the future.

The discussions highlight the notion of sensation. Nevertheless, for some, their experiences and political position show that this perception might not be harmful (for example, being "trained"). Electoral audiences see themselves faced with an attempt to convince and untangle the discourse in a way that depends on their viewpoint. They mistrust the political class in general and the politicians they do not like in particular; they also know media and political tricks which construct an inevitable reality. At times of political mediatization, this mistrust takes tools provided by mediatization to take a critical position against messages opposed to their beliefs. From here, depending on their position, they may see a spot as false or as one which has a logical discourse, a reflection of their diagnosis as a citizen. From the perspective of a spectator, they reveal what they consider to be mere appearances, or what they consider to be similar to what they believe as real. This position is produced previous to the exposure to the political adverts and shows that the private place of seeing the message is crossed by the collective experience of insecurity, as is the public position of mistrust of political advertising.

4.3. *Question of Perspectives*

What role does experience play in the interpretations of voters? Our third question (Q3) looks at the role of experience in the relation between the electoral audiences and mediatized political proposals. From this point, we arrive at our third result: electoral audiences tend to define political spots either as constructed to press emotional buttons (therefore false) or as logical and rational (therefore close to the truth). In other words, where a spectator falls outside the range of a candidate, where a voter's political position is opposed to the proposal, his or her critical viewpoint will increase (Table 2). In these cases, rather than criticize the exact crime prevention proposal of the candidate, his or her attention is centered on

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identifying the threads of political theatre: "It's about a constant image of what they want to do, but with good video filters [...] and people fall for it," pointed one Rodríguez Saá voter about a Macri (Cambiemos) spot. When the spectator doesn't like the candidate, the image loses its central place as they look for the trick. "Politicians are like magicians, they create great illusions, but when you discover the trick, the illusion falls," explained one Cambiemos voter. The tools of mediatized politics become exposed as the proposal of the "seller" is decentralized. In these cases, the spectator remembers that he or she is looking at fiction, that the spot was filmed, and that the narration magnifies the candidate's figure. "The trick is this: raise the camera and show [...] two million police officers," noted a Macri voter. This critical position reveals that the voter is aware of looking at a piece of mediatized politics, in other words, an electoral trick. This is the discovery of *skiography*, where the shadows show how the surroundings are far away from the central, real figure.

Electoral audiences would appear to consider that the discussion is fictional, alongside aesthetic elements to construct an image far from what they understand as reality. An FPV voter analyzed a Cambiemos spot: "He looks like his face has been touched up [...] there are lots of colors and pleasant music." The participants saw the advertising material more like a dramatization similar to fiction rather than a serious political debate. A position which was often repeated was that politicians adverse to own political convictions were treated like actors constructed by cinematographic tools, similar to entertainment celebrities. "I think that Massa watches a lot of Hollywood films," explained a Rodríguez Saá voter. In the words of a FIT sympathizer: "For me, Macri is pure image... they create it to sell him. There's no content." Reflecting on a Massa spot, two FPV voters explained:

> Participant 1: And anyway, it's filmed in a way...
>
> Participant 2: It looks like a film of...
>
> Participant 1: ...of *The Children of Gods*[8], from Brazil... you wouldn't last twenty minutes in a ghetto...you'd run like hell! You can only stand it because the film crew is there. The same again: him on the side with the white teeth... they all do that.

Gestures and tones of voice are also perceived as part of the acting and deception. Rather than criticize the political content, the participants discarded the spots on aesthetic and moral grounds. "We don't believe any of it anymore," argued a Cambiemos follower, "everything is done for advertising, and it just doesn't sound credible. "Candidates who are far from the participants' positions can be accused of lies. A Stolbizer follower on a Scioli (FPV) spot: "This spot is just so hard-faced [...] he's lying horrendously. He didn't do any of that... I can't stand to watch it!" The political advertising was about security, a public concern, but this strategy only works if the viewer identifies with the candidate. Therefore, positive responses to adverts on security are not produced by identification with the topic but with the political space of the candidate.

[8]In reference to the Brasilian film *City of God* which is set in a ghetto of Rio de Janeiro.

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Table 2

Table 2 (Question 3). Positioning of electoral audiences

Position (Q3)	Election spot	Candidate	Audience
Negative	Illusion. False	Magician	Find the trick behind the scene
Positive	Transparent. Real	Representative	Valid proposal

Source: Own elaboration. Analysis of the focus groups under study.

However, when voters looked at a spot of a candidate they liked, the feeling of being tricked was far less. Do you feel there's a trick behind this proposal?, we asked, to understand this differential interpretation of mediatized politics. The response in various groups involved a comparison to other candidates' spots: "No, and anyway is much shorter than the others, it is more precise," affirmed one voter watching the spot of his chosen party.

Although conceptually different, we can link the differential interpretation of electoral audiences with a cognitive political disagreement. According to this theory, from social psychology (Festinger, 1975), when a person is faced with two conflicting thoughts, a cognitive disagreement is produced, which must be resolved by reducing tension until a certain coherence is achieved in their belief systems. This process is not without contradictions; for example, an attitude could change when faced with reality. In our analysis, this mechanism is seen when a subject mentioned that all the candidates should address the topic of security; believes the promises of his or her own party; but perceives that candidates from other parties are making false promises. The tension disappears by means of the argument that there are illusions in the proposals of the other candidates (opposed to his or her choice candidate). In both cases, the viewer is conscious that the proposal is mediatized, but in one case, they refuse to accept the proposal, and in the other, they accept it, without apparently perceiving the inconsistency between their arguments and their definitions.

Frey (1986) found five conditions that explain this selectivity: the personal commitment of the subject to the topic, belief in the source, the ability to choose, the quantity of selective information, and the intensity of cognitive disagreement. Without entering into the different approaches and criticisms of cognitive disagreement (Humanes, 2014), we can use the tools of this theory to look at how tension arises when the topic (security) is of interest to the viewer, but the source belongs to a party which is adverse to their political orientation. If the person does not believe in the source, the party, the candidate of a political position, they do not believe the proposal on security and seek to justify the argument by looking at illusory techniques in political advertising.

While in the de-centered perspective, viewers use intuition to discover tricks, from a centered perspective, the rhetoric and visual arguments of the candidates represent relevant information. The spots show "an action" because "we can see it and touch it" (Macri voter), they "make sense" because "the numbers show a certain honesty and transparency" (Stolbizer voter). Therefore, when looking at the same political proposal (more community policing) in one case, it is perceived as a trick and in another not. The candidate who felt strongly that the

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proposal that in a FPV spot was lies, accepted the virtues of the Metropolitan police image represented in the Cambiemos spot[9].

Party sympathizers recognize that their candidates also construct advertising pieces. A group of FPV voters looking at the spot of their candidate:

> Participant 1: I don't like the music, it's very Hollywood (laughs).
>
> Participant 2: That take of him was good.
>
> Participant 3: With those drones, it's really good...

Electoral audiences recognize mediatized politics and, from this point, analyze the advertising. "The spot is very careful. It doesn't promise anything," noted one Massa supporter. The closeness of the candidate doesn't seem to affect the ability to perceive the emotional dimension of the publicity. Voters are exposed to mediatization, they know they are targets, and as viewers, they deconstruct the images presented as if in a game, similar to how they view special cinematographic effects, the arguments of a fiction film or a news item they feel is false. The perception and identification of fake news and fake ads are similar. Could the mistrust that citizens feel for the media also extend to political institutions? For electoral audiences, political mediatization would, therefore, be a reflection of the lack of confidence in the media, in politics and in its institutions.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we looked at the interpretations of a group of voters on the political campaign messages associated with urban violence in Argentina in 2015. Using a qualitative approach of focus groups, we identified the characteristics of mediatized civic experience in which viewers and citizens are intertwined in a new relationship between the public and private. When individual thoughts and collective political discussions occur in a mediated public context, contemporary voters can be re-considered as electoral audiences.

From this point, we identify how citizens targeted by mediated politics consider insecurity to be a priority topic for the presidential candidates. We then register how electoral audiences interpret election proposals based on their closeness to or distance from the belief system of each political party. In this way, we contribute to the idea that citizens become electoral audiences who interpret election promises based on their previous experiences (with crime/insecurity, politics, political institutions, and the media). Our results show that electoral audiences are not homogenous; their opinions are crossed by social and political experiences, although they agreed on fear of insecurity and the lack of confidence in state institutions. However, when distance or mistrust is felt towards a candidate, the same proposal provokes a different reaction and the candidate is perceived as an illusionist, presenting his or her proposals as if in television or film entertainment. Here the role of the electoral audiences is to discover the tricks and falseness of the candidates. When the trick is discovered, the candidate appears "naked" to audiences who are avid to know what's going on behind the screen and behind the political scene. On the other hand, when a candidate is considered to be close and trustworthy, the campaign messages are viewed as a reflection of the reality of the voter's everyday life. Therefore, levels of trust and mistrust articulate the reception of mediatized politics by electoral audiences.

Below we outline the limitations of the study, which will be revised in future works. The first is that we were unable, due to electoral time limits, to look in-depth at the natural, individual contexts of the reception of the audio-visual material. Secondly, we do not have space here to recover the pieces seen by the groups and therefore broaden the interpretation of contents, nor include the context of the election nor the previous political experiences of

[9] The Provincial Government of Scioli used security measures centered on the creation of local police forces. Macri, as head of the City of Buenos Aires Government, introduced a security force called the Metropolitan Police.

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the audiences. Despite these limitations, we believe that the results contribute to the field of communication studies and mediatized politics.

At a time when the analysis of mediatized politics measures and highlights the force of the media on politics and political contents on citizens, our study looks at the question of mediatized audiences. Our results should not be interpreted as a positive view by audiences (Budd, Entman & Steinman, 1990), celebrating critical and active individualism. However, rather as a contribution of elements to study mediatization by looking at the perceptions, often polysemic, of subjects with multiple experiences: political, cultural, economic, and multi-media. Among this multiplicity, we recognize that electoral audiences critically discuss, maybe not the "what," but the "how;" not the contents, in this case, political election proposals, but the forms of mediatization and the aesthetic characteristics of the adverts. In conclusion, the questions of this work attempt to show that political and cultural experiences, together with media logic, are part of an integral communicative process.

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