



THE MORNING CONFERENCES: a populism lesson for governing while communicating

CONFERENCE
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SIGNOS VITALES

EL PULSO DE MÉXICO

Image: in tiempo.com.mx: <https://tinyurl.com/msrz83k>

THE MORNING CONFERENCES

A populism lesson for governing while communicating

Government leaders having constant communications with the citizenry and giving transparency to their public decisions is always desirable. Lopez Obrador's morning conferences seemed to be a great instrument to achieve these goals at the beginning. However, in reality, they appear to be functioning as a political instrument enabled by the president to influence the public debate, distract the attention from uncomfortable topics for him, attack his enemies, and consolidate his narrative, which by the way, it is not aligned with reality.

Morning conferences of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (Lopez Obrador, for its acronym in Spanish) are not mere informative sessions done by the federal executive head, but they have been consolidated as a strategy to govern through the stigmatization polarization and lie reproduction. The famous mañaneras (morning conferences) fit perfectly in the populist communication

model that revolves around ten principles that various governments have used (Aguilar, 2020):

1. Establish direct communication with the governed people.
2. Influence in the public agenda establishment.
3. Conceal and temper the truth as well as lying systematically.
4. Target their electoral base exclusively.
5. Establish a clear distinction between the people and the anti-people.
6. Identify enemies whom they can confront permanently
7. Establish moral and quasi-religious discourses that highlight the government leader
8. Openly discredit to those whom they consider their enemies.
9. Consider media part of the anti-people elite.
10. Blame the past to justify their failures

Lopez Obrador had already used this communication instrument during his term as Head of the Government of then Distrito Federal (Federal District), giving national coverage to this platform that has been acquired a dimension not seen before. This action has allowed the president to establish central elements from public discussion, strengthen his narrative, and attack his enemies.

Up to June 20th, 2021, the president has had 641-morning conferences with which he has pretended to establish constant and direct communication with his followers. Unlike many dignitaries in the world, Lopez Obrador has successfully implemented a strategy that allows him to amplify his voice and use it as

much in the traditional media –that take the note of the day from the morning conferences themselves–, as in alternative media such as social networks and news blogs. The president has become the person the media talks about the most, and he has influenced successfully and significantly the public agenda.

During the current administration’s management, the most addressed topics in public opinion were influenced by the issues covered in the morning conferences. In the digital field, this relationship is evident. As reported by organization Metrics (2020), during last year’s first semester, the digital conversation was marked by several topics preferred by the president. After COVID–19, which was the most important topic of all the public opinion due to its national and global implications, Genaro Garcia Luna’s arrest was the main topic in the digital conversation, followed by feminist movements. Lopez Obrador also achieved position thematics such as comments on the presidential airplane, the BOA project, and Emilio Lozoya Austin’s arrest in Spain.

Images:

Garcia Luna is detained in Texas. Archive photo of el informador.mx: <https://tinyurl.com/3tp8pmt3>

“The feminist shout resounds in Mexico” in *El País*: <https://tinyurl.com/hpw9357c>



TABLA 1. MAIN TOPICS IN DIGITAL CONVERSATION IN MEXICO
FIRST SEMESTER 2020

POSITION	TOPIC
1	Covid-19: Cases in Mexico, business closure, and quarantine beginning
2	Genaro García Luna Case
3	Femicides in Mexico and Movement #UnDiaSinNosotras (#AdayWithOutUs)
4	#JusticiaParaGiovanni Case (#JusticeForGiovanni)
5	López Obrador declaration about the presidential airplane
6	T-MEC Commercial Agreement Ratification
7	BOA Project
8	Emilio Lozoya Case
9	Attack against Omar García Harfuch
10	Bonilla Law Case

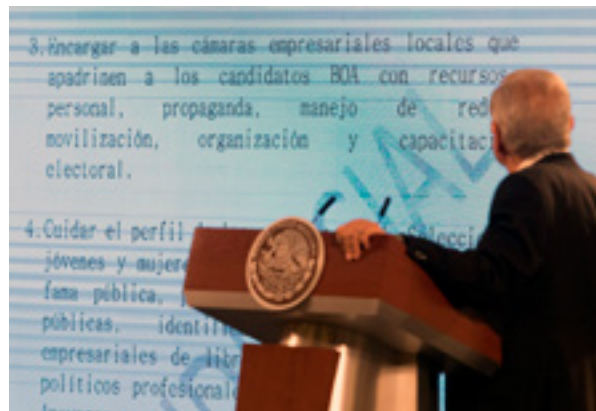
Images:

The presidential airplane raffle in latercera.com: <https://tinyurl.com/jhxus96h>

Presentation of the BOA in letrafranca.com. Photo: Moisés Pablo /Cuartoscuro at: <https://tinyurl.com/6snttnxx>

Lozoya detained in Spain in *El Universal*: <https://tinyurl.com/2pe9mumy>

Source: In-house elaboration with information from Metrics (2020).



Without taking the coronavirus pandemic and vaccination process to combat it into account, during 2020's second semester, the digital conversation was centered, mainly in: the United States of America's presidential elections (USA), the critics towards López Obrador for not congratulate Joe Biden after his victory, Emilio Lozoya's declarations about corruption between Mexico's government and Odebrecht, the approval of the consultation to prosecute ex-presidents, the elimination of trusts and the negative to National Electoral Institute (INE, for its acronym in Spanish) and the Federal Electoral Court of the Judiciary Federation (TEPJF, for its acronym in Spanish) to Mexico libre constitute as a political party.

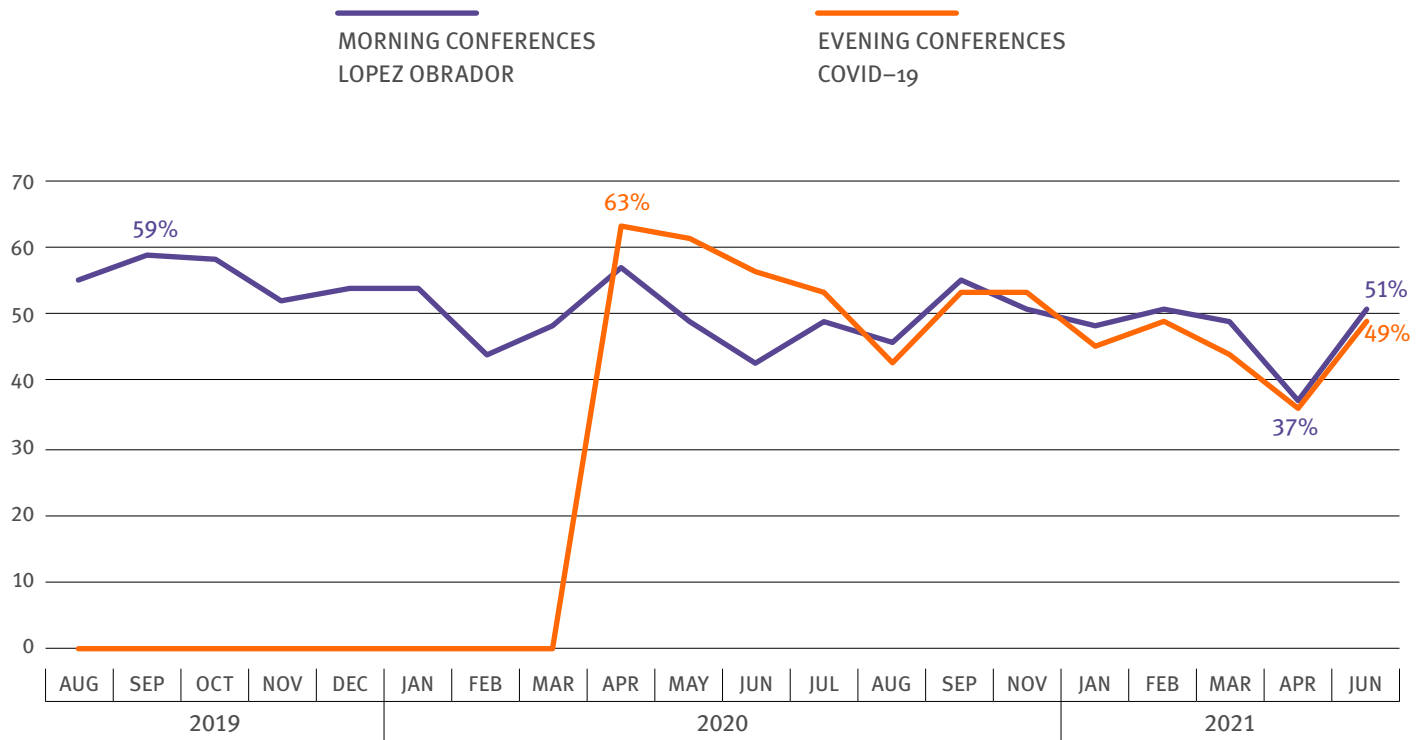
As in every populist communication model (Müller, 2017), the one implemented by the current government includes the systematic repetition of lies, half-truths, or complex sentences to verify. Until June 30th 2021, the organization SPIN counted 56 thousand 181, not truthful affirmations said by the president during the morning conferences. That is to say, 88 lies by morning conference. Albeit most governments lie, it is challenging to find governments and, concretely, Heads of States that are so exposed, and because of it, they resort to so many lies to getting off lightly from the questions asked to them establish certain general narratives.

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Precisely that narrative so often disassociated from reality, or at least from official data, has the objective to strengthen the bond with its electoral base. In other words, the president is not interested in speaking to the Mexican society as a whole but to his followers to reassure their inclination to the government and maintain a critical popular base. In this sense, the president has made a clear distinction between the people successfully comprised by “the poor” and those who support him unconditionally, and the anti-people, also called the conservative group or conservative elite, constituted by those who hold him accountable and question him legitimately or not. In fact, with information reported by SPIN, until December 31st, 2020, the words the leader had repeated most frequently were: people, which was repeated 4 thousand 650 times, and corruption, 4 thousand 443 times. On the other side, until February 15th, 2021, the same organization reports Lopez Obrador has said the word conservative and its derivatives on one thousand 454 occasions, and the word neoliberal and its derivatives on one thousand 441 occasions.

Considering half of the citizens approve the morning conferences (51% of the Mexican surveyed by El Financiero consider the morning conferences good or excellent). In that case, it makes sense that what is said in the president’s morning conferences has repercussions in public opinion. Parallely, after the June 6th elections, the political leader accused the middle class of being difficult to convince, aspirational, selfish, and capable of doing whatever it takes to succeed, strengthening the division Lopez Obrador uses to make between the people and the anti-people.

GRAPH 1. MORNING AND EVENING CONFERENCES OPINIONS (%)



Source: *El Financiero* (2021).

While Lopez Obrador has defended people like Manuel Bartlett, whom he considered a true patriot for defending energetic Mexican interests despite being involved in potential corruption cases, he has discredited everyone who has opposed his government project. Among those excel the members of what he called “the mob of power,” such as Diego Fernandez de Ceballos, Felipe Calderon, and Salinas de Gortari. As SPIN (2021) reports, Carlos Salinas and Felipe Calderon are the ex-presidents with more mentions (all negatives) by Lopez Ob-

rador. Until September 2020, Calderon was mentioned on 281 occasions and Salinas 2060.

Other enemies created by the president are some members of the big entrepreneurship who, in Lopez Obrador's words, are part of a corrupt elite that felt like Mexico's owners. In fact, he has repeated on multiple occasions that he is not a mere manager to the economic power service, nor a florist, but the president of Mexico, referring previous presidents were at the big entrepreneurship service.

Those whom the president has pointed out in the morning conferences are: Gustavo de Hoyos, Mexican Confederation of Business Owners president (COPAR-MEX, for its acronym in Spanish), and Claudio X Gonzalez, founder and former president of Mexicans Against Corruptions and Impunity (MCCI, for its acronym in Spanish), who also promoted the opposing coalition to the government constituted by PRI, PAN, and PRD (political parties). Both of them have been accused of trying to destabilize the federal government. In fact, the morning of May 8th, 2021, the president announced he sent a diplomatic letter to the American government asking to clarify the amount and the ends of the resources that through the American embassy, he sends to civil organizations like MCCI, the Public Policy Research Center (IMCO, for its acronym in Spanish) and Mexico Evalua. It is essential to point out that attacks from the president to the civil society have become more intense during 2021, and the organization MCCI has been accused of corruption (the president calls it "Mexican in favor of Corruption"). He assured that he demanded the USA government stop financing it, to what the Biden government replied it would continue financing organizations and reporters that fight corruption.

These attacks have been sheltered by a moral superiority discourse that seems to protect the president from any legal or illegal actions that he commits. In fact, Lopez Obrador has referred to himself as the bird that can cross the swamp without getting stained (Aguirre, 2020). In addition, his moral narrative has been completed with the initial promise of writing a moral constitution that ended up in the emission of a moral passbook that was distributed by the nation servants (Realidad7, 2021), considered by diverse reporters and academics as the electoral territorial army of the federal government. Even though this government has identified itself as a left-wing government, the president has discredited the feminist movement, branding it as being used by conservatives (Belmont, 2021). He has refused to take a stand on drugs legalization and decriminalize abortion, homo-parental marriages, and adoptions by same-sex couples.

The federal executive considers the role of traditional media as cover-up media. It has accused big media, mainly the ones that have been more critical of his government. He accuses them of being allies of entrepreneurial elites and past governments. The newspaper Reforma with intellectuals and reporters such as Enrique Krauzer, Hector Aguilar Carmin, Carlos Loret de Mola, or Ciro Gomez Leyva have been branded as adversaries that have benefited from past corruption and are opposed to the current government because they lost privileges. The pointing did not stop there, and legal action was taken. The magazine Nexos, directed by Aguilar Carmin, was disabled for receiving contracts with the public administration for two years, and a fine of almost a million pesos was imposed on it (Secretariat of the Civil Service, 2020). When asked by the reporter Alvaro Delgado about the Latinus site's financial origins during

the morning conferences, the president commented he was aware that the site, directed by Loret de Mola, was financed by Roberto Madrazo relatives and the Michoacan government (Flores, 2021).

**TABLE 2. MOST MENTIONED NATIONAL MEDIA
BY THE PRESIDENT DURING THE MORNING CONFERENCES
CLOSED ON FEBRUARY 15TH, 2021**

MEDIA	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
<i>Reforma</i>	390
<i>El Universal</i>	145
<i>El Financiero</i>	55
<i>Milenio</i>	24
<i>La Jornada</i>	24
<i>Excelsior</i>	23

Source: In-house elaboration with information from SPIN (2021).

**TABLE 3. MOST MENTIONED WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS BY THE PRESIDENT
DURING THE MORNING CONFERENCES
CLOSED ON MAY 16TH 2021**

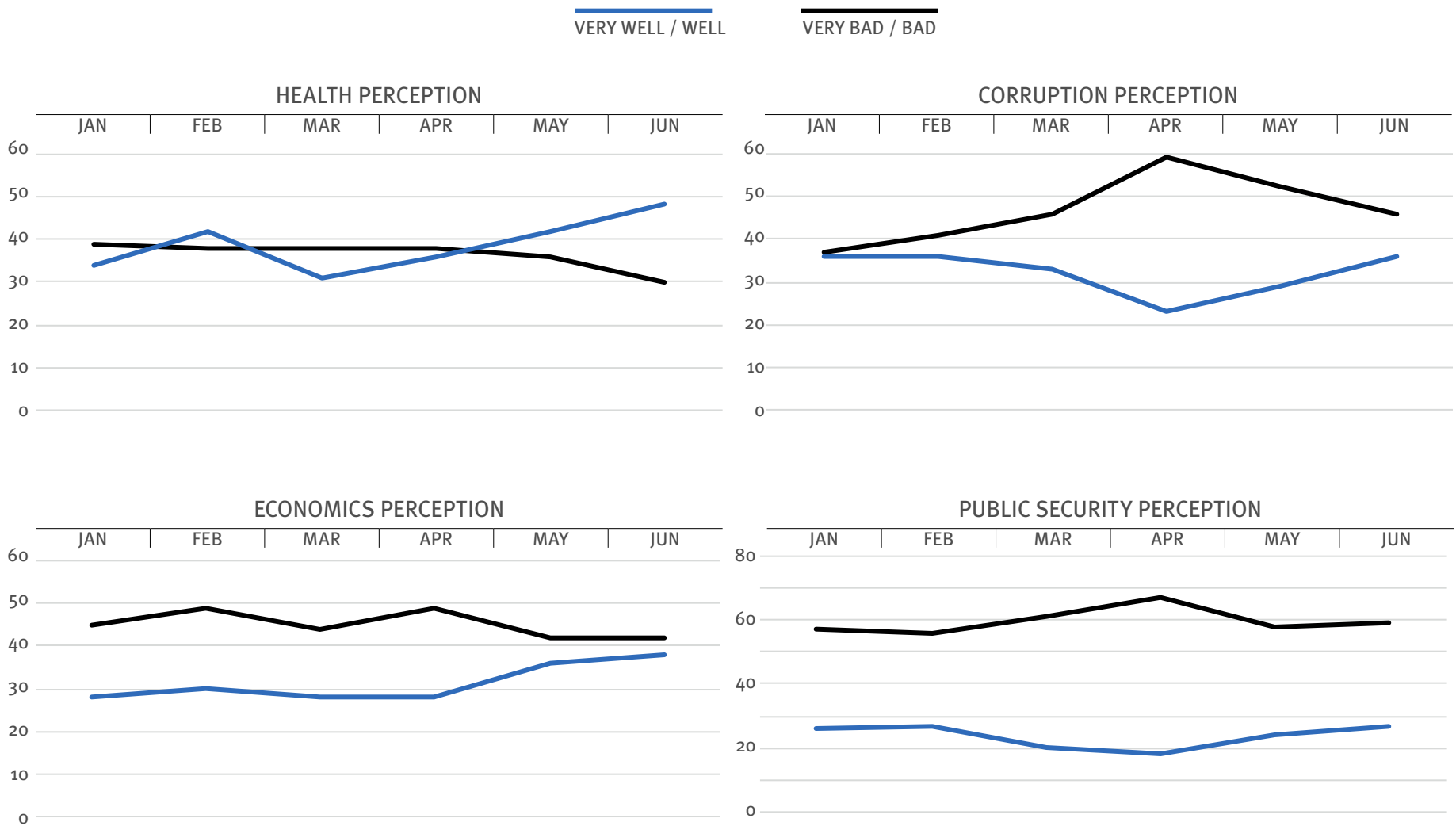
WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
Enrique Krauze	91
Héctor Aguilar Camín	72
Carlos Loret de Mola	48
Ciro Gómez Leyva	36
Joaquín López Dóriga	20
Raymundo Riva Palacio	14

Source: In-house elaboration with information from SPIN (2021).

Finally, the president has been consistent in blaming the past for all the current ills. The most relevant indicators to measure the country’s situation were deeply worrying before the beginning of the current administration; nonetheless, none of these have improved. In the security field, there is no improvement since the first day of the current government. Until March 2021, the Executive Secretariat of the National System for Public Security had registered 80 thousand 534 homicides more than during the last 28 months of government of Peña, when the same institution counted 70 thousand 51 homicides. In the transparency are, this government is the one with the most direct awarded contracts, a little more of 324 thousand million pesos between 2019 and 2020. Even though inside the National Development Plan 2019 and in the 50 general guidelines made by Lopez Obrador after the 2018 elections, it was established that the construction contracts would be carried out throughout public tenders with the participation of citizens and observers from the United Nations Organization (ONU, for its acronym in Spanish). After two years and a half Morena’s followers, almost 10 million more poor people have been registered. Naturally, this was a pandemic consequence, and the federal government inaction to support those who lost their income due to the sanitary crisis.

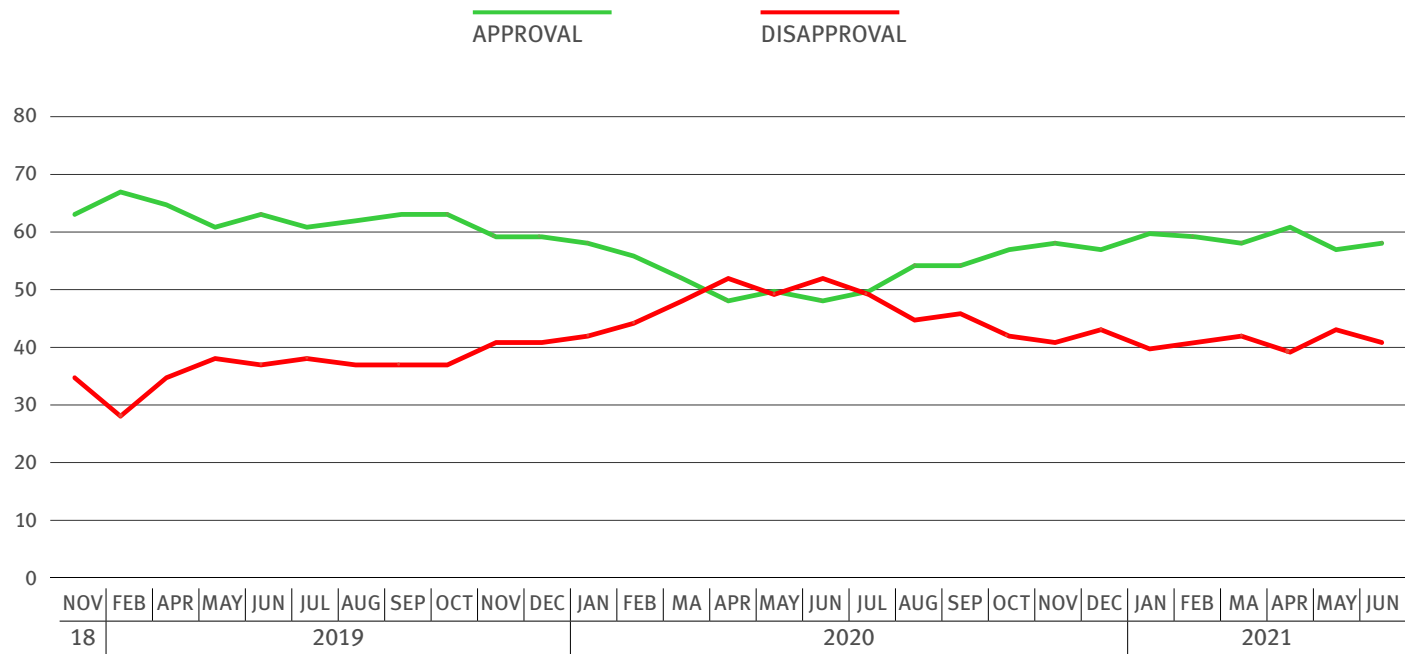
SECURITY	HAS NOT IMPROVED	80,534 HOMICIDES UNTIL MARCH 2021. MORE THAN 10,483 DURING THE LAST TWO YEARS OF PEÑA NIETO’S PRESIDENCY
TRANSPARENCY	DIRECT AWARDED CONTRACTS	324 THOUSAND MILLION PESOS BETWEEN 2019 AND 2020
POVERTY	HAS INCREASED	10 MILLION MORE POOR PEOPLE
HEALTH	BUDGET REDUCTION	IN 2021, 1,244 MILLION PESOS LESS

GRAPH 2. PERCEPTION OF LOPEZ OBRADOR'S GOVERNMENT RESULTS
 JANUARY–JUNE 2021



Source: In-house elaboration with data from *El Financiero* (2021).

GRAPH 3. AVERAGE PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL 2018–2021



Source: In-house elaboration with data from Mitofsky (2021).

Despite the results, the government has established a language that allows it to transfer the government’s bad results’ responsibility to previous governments. In the area of healthcare, it blamed the “neoliberal governments” for dismantling the public healthcare system, although this government was the one reducing it amid the pandemic, the 2021 healthcare budget to 1,244 million pesos. Similarly, it has blamed Felipe Calderon for increasing homicidal violence in the country (which is not true). However, it maintains a military-type security strategy that has proven to fail for almost 15 years (Signos Vitales, 2020c), and

in the human rights area, despite assuring that now the rights of everybody are respected since 2019, a migration policy of contention started. It has criminalized migrants who have been chased by the National Guard (Signos Vitales, 2020a). The important thing for the president is that he does not assume responsibility for bad results and has worked for him. According to Mitofsky (2021), the presidential approval of June 2021 was 58%, just 9 points below its maximum registered in April and June 2020. All of this, despite his government, is disapproved in almost all public policy areas.

It should be noted that during the June 20th, 2021 morning conference, the president communicated the creation of the program *Quién es quién en las mentiras de la semana* (Who is Who in the Lies of the Week), a section which, in words of the president, pretends to provide more information to the Mexican people to create more conscious citizenship. In contrast, diverse national and international organizations expressed their discontent with the decision considering it stigmatizing and dangerous. The Inter-American Press Association (SIP, for its acronym in Spanish) asked president Lopez Obrador to stop the recurrent stigmatization campaign against media and reporters, considering it dangerous since it motivates aggressions and violent facts (Infobae, 2021). Moreover, practically unanimously, reporters (including those traditionally close to Lopez Obrador's project like Jorge Zepeda Patterson) consider the president's decision hurts the presidential institution, and it is dangerous because it threatens freedom of speech (*El Pais*, 2021)

In brief, the federal government communication and particularly Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador's, meet the requirements of a populist communication, centered in polarization, the creation of a narrative with moral and religious slants, the

repetition of lies, the creation of a language to divide the good from the bad and to make another people accountable for the government's failures. If this situation continues the same, there are still three years left of morning conferences where the opposition will have to find ways to counteract this powerful presidential communication tool.

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