



KONRAD  
ADENAUER  
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CALL FOR PARTICIPATION  
THE 2ND AND 3RD OF APRIL 2020

# POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AT THE TIME OF ELECTIONS CAMPAIGNS: FROM STRATEGIC RHETORIC TO POLARIZATION

THE DEADLINE TO SEND THE SUMMARIES IS:  
JANUARY 31, 2020 AT MIDNIGHT

THE SYMPOSIUM WILL TAKE PLACE IN TUNIS  
APRIL 2 AND 3, 2020

## **Preamble: The dialectic of propaganda and communication**

The 2019-2020 political season in Tunisia and elsewhere is undoubtedly a historical deadline for the exercise of rivalries, struggles and conflicts among existing parties. However, they are not always confrontation programs among contenders for the Supreme Judiciary as well as for the strategic positions of legislation. In fact, several nations, around the world pass the test of legislative elections.

The conditions under which the ouster of dictatorial and totalitarian regimes have been operating in several of these countries, notably since the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 (Delbarre, 2000: 289-327; Fleury, 2009: 79-141), and they persistently pose new challenges relating to the establishment of free and transparent elections with publicized deadlines (Habermas, 1988 reed.). Holding such elections, in fact, needs to respect the principle of equality of opportunity, even if it seems to be suspended (Boudon, 1973) in several of these countries, and practice the methods and techniques of political communication (Jeandemange, 2018: 169-177, Beck, 1997).

Initially, things seem clear and well defined : on the one hand, propaganda for a single party (Gobe and Chouikha, 2015); on the other, a system that cherishes political communication as a factor of competition between different political parties (Delporte, 2006: 30-45). The latter is, in fact, a sign of authentic pluralism and the birth of an "oppositional public space" (Negt, 2007), even polarized and split (Coulibaly, 2019: online) in which the various protagonists participate. However, how do we switch from propaganda to political communication? And can we ever completely replace the former by the latter? In fact, if there has always been a little political communication in propaganda, is there not so often a little propaganda in political communication? These are the questions at the origin of this conference. More precisely, even if political communication seems to replace propaganda in several regimes, it is necessary, at this international symposium of IPSI 2020, to examine more closely the extent to which political communication provides skeptical information that can feed the conscience and knowledge of the citizen and at the same time open the door to outsiders (Becker, 1985) to allow them to access as easily as possible the Establishment (Allal, Geisser, 2018) during presidential and legislative elections.

## **Studying three logics of political communication**

The aim of this symposium is to focus on three main logics of political communication during the run up to elections.

The first is related to material organization (Godelier, 1984) and election campaign technique as a rationalizing process, limited in space and time, with a well-defined objective and targeting a population with a clearly controlled campaign budget. It is important to note that this organizing logic is most often thwarted by obstacles related to hubris (Castoriadis, 1996) and unexpected events during the campaign: an arrest, an accident, a sudden death, an assassination, floods, a terrorist attack destabilizing the timing of the campaign's engagement, etc. Therefore, what is expected from the running candidates is to show their ability to provide reactive answers to these obstacles and events. In other words, how will they adequately resolve the crisis in question even though they do not yet have the reins of authority?

The second logic is that which animates the rhetoric of the election campaigns and in particular the moment of entry into the campaign, its semiotics, as a cardinal moment; that is to say, an opportunity allowing (or not) to build in the long term the link between candidate and what is so called and qualified as an "electoral body" (Musso, 1988:11-29).

The third logic relates to the use of communication actions taken during the electoral process. In this way, it is pertinent to examine how opinion polls are mobilized as strategies of influence, conquest and even manipulation not only of the public opinion but also the strategies of the various competitors. With this prism, polls are no longer means of information but rather more astute techniques for winning over the electorate (Carré, Delbarre, 2003).

### **Axis 1: The election campaign as an organizational device**

We can not deny that the success of an election campaign depends, in large part, on the organizational system implemented and in particular on the mobilization of resources. In modern democracies, nevertheless, the reality of the political party seems to be fading and weakening. Today, for example, we are witnessing the creation of political parties for the unique purpose of winning elections. These are, therefore "à la carte" political parties set up according to a purely opportunistic strategy (Musso, 2019) and in a context of struggle for legitimacy and visibility (Voirol, 2005: 89-121).

Increasingly, the organizational process of electoral deadlines is also marked by a timetable announcing the dates governing legislative and presidential elections. Setting up an election ahead of the other raises tactical issues and communicational positioning among parties, actors and contenders to power that the media take into account in their follow-up of the facts and gestures. In addition, the rivalry between the latter presupposes the holding of political debates with meticulously timed speeches and campaign teams working hard to help their contender win. Moreover, in democratic systems, the organization of election campaigns is increasingly the prerogative, mission and responsibility of independent bodies. They collaborate with media regulatory institutions such as the CSA in France, HAICA in Tunisia, HAAC in Benin or Federal Communications Commission in the United States, etc.

These bodies use monitoring, train journalists (Elhaou, 2018) and ensure representation and visibility equally distributed among the different running political forces whether for the legislative or presidential elections. These bodies take also into account in their choice of criteria equity and respect of "cultural diversity" in terms of color, gender and religious minority, even if, in reality, this concept is somewhat a *tote* (Mœglin, 2013: 43-53). Seen from a distance, these bodies thus convey the image of guarantors of individual and collective rights and a healthy climate of competition. However, the content of the latter often takes precedence over the regulatory claims of the bodies.

## **Axis 2: The rhetoric of election campaigns and the strategies at work**

In his introduction to Aristotle's book, *Rhetoric*, French scholar Michel Meyer presents Aristotelian rhetoric as treating "*the use of speech to please as well as to convince, to plead as to deliberate, to reason as to seduce [...] Rhetoric is thus a logic of identity and difference, difference between men, an identity of a thesis to find, an object of persuasion or seduction. Rhetoric is presented as the negotiation of the distance between beings, or rather as the study of the way in which they negotiate it, to accentuate it or, on the contrary, to reduce it. [...] Rhetoric is therefore a hybrid situated between the dialectic, by its concern with probable reasoning and politics, by its sense of the ends*" (Introduction of the Rhetorical book of Aristotle, 329 before JC, 2006 for the version in French consulted: 5-6).

According to this definition, it appears that the candidates in competition are using less and less the principle of reason and putting more emphasis on a simplistic or even populist discourse. It arouses resentment rather than promotes lucidity among potential voters and therefore leads to the "disintegration of the city" (Khiari, 2003). In this case, entry into the campaign is always a preferred means for hopefuls in both presidential and legislative elections. Thus, the multiple candidates, especially the most endowed with capital sympathy, pay close attention to their speeches in the different television and radio programs (Mouchon, 1995). With regard to the official announcement of their entry into the campaign, some choose the public media; others opt for a speech among the population in a remote region or announce their candidacies from their hometowns, or from their spouses' native life, to signal their attachment to the sources. Some others do so through radio interventions. Still others start their campaign in modern means of transport to signal the dynamism of their posture. This rhetorical and semiotic process of seduction is also marked by the emergence of what can be described as new media sophists.

These are well and truly present on the various shows and their passages are strongly shared on digital platforms. These new sophists present themselves as mediators; they do not have a particular ideology but on the other hand, they have great capacities of discursive manipulation to the extent that they can defend a thesis and its opposite for the sole purpose of electing their hopeful to power. Manners are, in fact, diverse and mixed and deserve study, debate, problematization to better understand these phenomena of political communication located in space and time. In the practice of these numerous rhetorics, each contender tries, therefore, to distinguish himself/herself, to work on his/her image, his/her appearance, to seek to be supported by "spins doctors", "ace of communication", advisers who never lose in a logic of performativity (Hobbs, 2015: 371-386, Sánchez, 2018: 3-18).

Along the way, all the candidates highlight colors, objects and even symbols they consider the most attractive (Sfez, 1988). All want to touch the "sensitivity" of voters, attract their attention through rhetorical strategies that care less and less for a rational and wisely argued discourse (Legendre, 2012). In this perspective, political rhetoric gradually and undeniably moves towards "the peopolisation of politics" (Dakhli and Lhérault, 2008: 8-12), that is to say the theatricalization and staging through which the image takes over social problems (Charpentier and Brulois, 2013).

### **Axis 3: Political communication as a mode of government of visibility on the various media supports**

Presidential and legislative campaigns are undeniably an opportunity for running candidates in these countries to make their programs known to all registered voters or even to the population as a whole. These are cases that allow researchers in Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) and Political Communication (PC) specialists to study, among other things, the issues of public opinion polls published (for the entire population) and unpublished (for political parties). In this third area, we are waiting for research on the strategies of political actors in relation to opinion polls. In other words, how do the different contenders build and manage their positioning, their message and their image in relation to the results of these polls? These often fuel a political and electoral uproar (Morin, Nair, 1997) in which mass media as well as digital platforms are transformed into reservoirs of hatred and a field of exchange of multiple and varied invectives (Njutapwoui, 2015, online). The pace of these online and audiovisual quarrels is accelerating with the approach of universal suffrage. All this happens on the detriment of the voter and his good understanding of the issues and their stakes.

In this context, the fieldwork of Dominique Cardon shows that the emergence of the Internet, especially in the political sphere, has been accompanied, within the ruling elite, by a strong pessimistic vision. In fact, these elites consider that political and social negativity are more and more visible through digital platforms. According to them, this phenomenon reduces though the margins of social expectation and hope that political action requires to function. According to Cardon, political actors think that the ability of everyone to have an idea about everything and to take a stand on everything has effectively emptied the collective action of its meaning. Cardon explains consequently how the Internet has created a new technical determinism among politicians, which exposes itself in these terms:

*“A big process of deregulation of the information market has been opened by the digital. It would be responsible for Brexit, the elections of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro or the radicalism of les gilets jaunes (in France- The Yellow Vests). People voted badly because they were manipulated by malicious actors who were able to exploit the most toxic aspects of the network infrastructure. The question makes so little doubt that a somewhat trivial technological determinism now serves as a key to explaining the rise of populism, the crisis of the media and the spread of irrational beliefs. Internet is the problem and if we could clean the web of infox, we would be done with bad votes, mistrust and credulity” (Cardon, 2019, [Online]).*

In order to dissipate as much as possible the overflows and manipulation of the population on and through digital platforms, the solution proposed by the States seems to be the establishment of protective legislation that more or less regulates the publication of polls and widely describes at the same time the manner in which each candidate must appear in the media market. This legal framework also ensures an equitable distribution of speaking time between candidates in the media. In addition, political debates of confrontation are now proposed (In Arab and African countries) as a television show so that the public can be exposed to the rhetorical strategies, and sometimes the arguments (usually there are no arguments), of the different candidates.

Finally, whatever the country, it seems that in this climate of political tugging; opinion polls fuel and accentuate polarization. In fact, in the climate of a campaign considered as deleterious, where all the means are good, unfounded fake-news, misinformation and accusations proliferate between respective campaign teams. This false news is therefore a weapon of attack and response to opponents in the only aim to win. Consequently, this battle for power is feeding conventional mass media such as television and radio and at the same time has a repercussion on the digital platforms; similar to a recursive circle creating a main stream effect. These communication messages create a phenomenon of echo chambers ((Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018), that is to say a kind of magnifying effect and amplification on insignificant phenomena from the private life of the candidate, for example, which is therefore done through excessive redundancy operating in symbolic violence ambiance and with huge aggressiveness of positions. All this is operating with a very little consideration to journalistic deontology (Turbide, 2019: online). Thus, these messages exacerbate competition between candidates and sometimes drive them adrift, if not most often. At the same time, this tugging hijacks the work of the journalist to the extent that it is called to put aside its neutrality and objectivity. Most of the time, it happens in an illegal manner or, at least, in a universe without clear and precise rules, or even in the forgetfulness of the boundaries of the game in order to blur the elector's capacity of discernment and appreciation. He chooses then, more than once, to refrain because of weariness and misunderstanding (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018) even if all the candidates have well occupied the media space.

**Coordinator of the colloquium : Mohamed Ali Elhaou, Teacher-Researcher at IPSI**

To participate in the IPSI symposium, each participant is invited to submit a summary of his or her speech **on 31 January 2020; until midnight**. This summary must include the introduction of the research object, the problem, the insight and the methodology mobilized in detail.

Participants whose text has been selected will be informed **by the end of February 2020**. The symposium will take place **on April, 2nd and 3rd, 2020 in Tunis**. The final texts of the symposium can be sent **until the end of June 2020**. Thus, the proposals will be published after the symposium in a collective work.

Double-blind selection will favor empirical approaches. The study of the phenomena of political communication and propaganda during election campaigns is the most relevant criterion of our selection. Also, the originality of the proposal and its use of new research techniques will be an important acceptance criteria. Indeed, this conference is intended to be really international.

To participate, please send, at the same time, your intervention to the following two addresses:

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## **Scientific Committee of the Symposium :**

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- **Neveu Erik**, (Emeritus Professor of Political Science. Co-director of the Res Publica collection, PUR, France).
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- **Zamit Fredj**, (Teacher and Researcher at l'IPSI, Tunisia).

## **Conference Organizing Committee**

- **Barhoumi Haifa**, PHD at l'IPSI.
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