The influence of communicational habits on the citizens' political sophistication

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Abstract: In this paper, an indicator to measure the degree of electoral political sophistication was created to determine along with the traditional indicator of political sophistication the impact of communicative variables. For this, an analytical survey was carried out after the gubernatorial elections of the Mexican states of Nuevo Leon (2015), Puebla (2016) and Mexico (2017). Findings showed a positive impact of the use of web pages about politics and interactive communication in both dimensions of sophistication as well as electoral debates on electoral sophistication.

Key words: political sophistication, political knowledge, communicational habits, Internet, electoral campaign.

Resumen: En este artículo se creó un indicador para medir el grado de sofisticación política electoral con el fin de analizar, junto al indicador tradicional de sofisticación política, el impacto de las variables comunicativas en su nivel. Para ello, se trabajó con una encuesta analítica aplicada tras las elecciones a gobernador de los estados mexicanos de Nuevo Leon (2015), Puebla (2016) y Estado de México (2017). Los resultados mostraron un impacto positivo del seguimiento de páginas web de política y de la comunicación interactiva en ambas dimensiones de la sofisticación, y de los debates electorales en la sofisticación electoral.

Palabras clave: sofisticación política, conocimiento político, hábitos comunicativos, Internet, campaña electoral.

Introduction[1]

A solid democracy requires steady institutions as well as a firm political system which may allow the alternation of power among the different political options by holding free and just elections. However, although such structures are needed to manage a system wholly democratic, they are not enough. Oftentimes a citizenry committed in a political and civic degree is considered a condition for the good functioning of democracy, it should be informed about the events which take place in the political sphere of the country (Buendía and Somuano, 2003; Delli-Carpini, 2004; Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Citizens will be able to correctly express their opinions and appropriately articulate their political preferences inasmuch as they are informed (Elenbaas *et al.*, 2014).

The motivation and interest to acquire information about politics and the ability to process and accumulate it are key elements to structure the citizen's political knowledge. (Luskin, 1990; Zaller, 1992). The consequences of political knowledge stored in citizens not only impact the existence of a citizenry of quality, but also the health of democracy upheld by society (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006). This encouraged different disciplines to study the generation process of political knowledge and its repercussions for the system. Usually in these works the concepts of political knowledge, political awareness and political sophistication are found as interchangeable or at least very related with each other (Popa, 2015; Rhee and Cappella, 1997; Zaller, 1992). The latter, political sophistication, will be taken as a reference in this study, as it encompasses the other two.

Having sophisticated individuals in the political field is crucial for the good development of democracy, since it leads to the efficient exertion of rights which pertain to them as citizens. This is so because they have a more complete and exact knowledge, which is based on a wider and better organized and incorporated structures of mental knowledge on politics (Luskin, 1987 and 1990; Rhee and Cappella, 1997). This enables them to make use of more and better cognitive resources in order to, for instance, vote thoughtfully or take part in the different political fields which democracy offers them (Buendía and Somuano, 2003; Hollander, 2014; Prior, 2005). An ideal democracy should have a great number of highly sophisticated citizens, however, in reality this is not easy to occur. (Dassonneville, 2012).

Normally, less sophisticated citizens conform an important part of society, and it is not even surprising that the average citizen shows little interest for the events in the political field and so does not have a special motivation to look for information about politics.

Now, even if citizens were motivated to access information, (Dassonneville, 2012; Luskin, 1990), it is not always easy to obtain it. In fact, political knowledge is generally acquired in a vicarious way through media (Elenbaas *et al.*, 2014; Rhee and Cappella, 1997), where in a great amount political campaigns and debates take place. Media, therefore, assume a significant role since they are a technique of transference and translation of political reality to citizens (Muñiz, 2012). They constitute to a large extent the main source of information for most citizens (Cho *et al.*, 2009; Rojas, 2006; Woolley *et al.*, 2010), being their information coverage on politics the currency with which democracies function (Gerth and Siegert, 2012). Therefore, since they allow to establish a bound between the opinions of citizens on political subjects and their electoral decision, they contribute to governance.

Probably, one of the political moments in which media acquire a fundamental role as a mechanism of information is during electoral campaigns. In fact, it has been seen that during electoral campaigns citizens broaden their knowledge on public affairs (Craig *et al.*, 2005; Hansen and Pedersen, 2014), which contributes to make a knowledgeable decision when voting.

It is possible that these stages of political life in countries conform a propitious situation for the increase of civic political sophistication, not precisely the one linked with the degree of factual political knowledge (Weisberg and Nawara, 2010), but rather the one related with the knowledge about campaign proposals, attitudes and candidates' competence who participate in the electoral battle (Stevens, 2005). Although there is a great number of research on political sophistication linked with the citizens' factual knowledge, the number of research on the voter's sophistication (Van Heerde *et al.*, 2006) or electoral awareness (Schuck *et al.*, 2013), which in this paper is called electoral political sophistication, is lesser.

Following these premises, this paper sought to determine what importance the different communicative practices performed by citizens have –for instance, attention to political contents, use of web pages about politics, watching electoral debates, use of social networks and political conversation– in both the generation of factual political sophistication and electoral political sophistication. In order to do so, data from the surveys

carried out in the Mexican states of Nuevo Leon (2015), Puebla (2016) and Mexico (2017) were used, in the context of electoral campaigns for gubernatorial elections of each State.

Literature used

Conceptualization of political sophistication

It is true that the term political sophistication has been widely used in scientific literature, in disciplines such as political sciences, psychology or political communications, however, there is not a uniformity regarding its conceptual definition. As Luskin (1987 and 1990) said, research avoids to a large extent the conceptual debate in order to focus on the operational field of what the definition of political sophistication encompasses. One of the reasons for this is that two disciplines have conceptualized this term differently (Rhee and Cappella, 1997). Political sciences usually surveys more the ideological nature of the people's political knowledge, whereas for political psychology the concept is seen from the process of construction of knowledge and its use by citizens. Consequently, there are multiple definitions. Some of them link the concept with the citizens´ political confidence, the amount of information they receive, their interest for politics or their ability to make political judgements (Lee and Chang, 2011).

In his widely quoted work, Luskin (1987: 860) defines political sophistication as the "number, diversity and organization [both internal and inter-schematic] of the political frames of a person." That is to say, sophistication is linked with the person's degree of "cognitive complexity", understanding that the greater their political experience is, the greater their degree of political sophistication will be, and in the same way their cognitive ability (Lee and Chang, 2011; Zaller, 1992). In this sense, to the extent someone possess greater political sophistication, they will tend to give more attention to political events and to have a greater ability to comprehend them as well (Zaller, 1992: 21). That is, as the citizen pays attention to what occurs around them, they will have a greater political awareness, which will contribute to enlarge their political knowledge expressed in objective and well-formed ideas about the system (Schuck *et al.*, 2013).

So, a sophisticated citizen is the one who has an "intellectual or cognitive compromise [...] with public affairs" (de Vreese *et al.*, 2011: 183); that is, someone who has cognitive structures or deep, complex, and organized political frames (Dassonneville, 2012; Miller, 2011; Stevens, 2005), which

are used to process information, value the political actors as well as identify and articulate their interests to compromise and participate in a more beneficial way in politics (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

These structures presuppose the citizen's factual political knowledge, understood as the notions about the political system, its structure, functioning and rules of the game, about its principal actors and activities within it, which —before the subjective opinions— can be objectively verified (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Popa, 2015; Rhee and Cappella, 1997). This centrality of knowledge in the configuration of a sophisticated citizen has led a great amount of literature to use it as a synonym of sophistication (Buendía and Somuano, 2003; Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996) by saying that it is the only common measure in all researches carried out (Rhee and Cappella, 1997).

Before this constrained conception of political sophistication which links it solely with a part of political knowledge, other authors have mentioned the need to have more elements in order to offer an appropriate definition of what is expected of a sophisticated citizen (Miller, 2011; Muñiz, 2012). For instance, Guo and Moy (1998) underscore that sophistication derives also from the political interest which citizens maintain to acquire information. This idea is formulated also by authors like Catellani and Alberici (2012) or Dassonneville (2012: 27), who says that "the variables related with political sophistication [...] are 'the usual suspects', political knowledge and interest in politics." So, just as different degrees of knowledge can be presented so the specialization and degrees in the interest in politics, contributing to the fact that not all citizens involve themselves in the same topics nor in the same measure (Dalton, 2006; Norris 2000). Therefore, the more informed and the more a citizen reflects upon subjects they consider of high interest, the more plausible is that they develop greater levels of personal political sophistication (Muñiz, 2012).

That said, it can be perceived that in order to produce a significant degree of political sophistication in citizens, not only does maintaining frames and mental structures in the form of political knowledge is necessary, but it is also required an acceptable degree of interest so as to motivate them to keep themselves informed about the public affairs of their sphere (Buendía and Somuano, 2003; de Vreese *et al.*, 2011; Smith and Durand, 1995). This conceptualization moves political sophistication to the field of a latent construct, in which features such as attention to political information, interest and political knowledge are combined (Miller, 2011; Stevens, 2005). Therefore, its operation will imply measuring factual knowledge in a one-dimensional concept, starting from the sum of correct answers from

different questions with regard to particular matters, as well as the degree of interest held by citizens regarding different subjects and topics about the politic context. (Catellani and Alberici, 2012; de Vreese *et al.*, 2011; Guo and Moy, 1998; Miller, 2011; Muñiz, 2012; Popa, 2015; Singh and Roy, 2014; Stevens, 2005).

Political sophistication in the electoral context

Measuring political sophistication has been traditionally linked with the study of the degree of factual or real political knowledge held by citizens (Luskin, 1987 and 1990; Miller, 2011; Rhee, 1997), usually by means of verifying the quantity of possessed knowledge (Rhee and Cappella, 1997). However, this way to calculate knowledge only verifies through factual questions the degree of knowledge citizens possess as they stay informed about a series of events, for it falls short to calculate the real degree in which citizens process the information and construct frames about those events which enable them to comprehend their political sphere (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Rhee and Cappella, 1997). That is to say, not only does recognizing institutions, norms and actors is important, but also having awareness about how the different actors manage the different affairs of political interest and how debates arise concerning such affairs. (Henderson, 2014; Rhee and Cappella, 1997).

Undoubtedly, the knowledge about how the common system functions is needed to structure society, yet it becomes even more important in electoral contexts. In these electoral contexts citizens who effectively comprehend, from the proposals debated during campaigns, the political reality are required in order to be voters who make decisions and participate in the system (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Henderson, 2014). It is commonly known that electoral campaigns are the ground where political debate tends to increase between the political actors, whether candidates, parties or their representatives, and their interaction with citizens increases as well (Drew and Weaver, 2006; Druckman and Leeper, 2012; Stevens, 2005). Although it is true that in these contexts strategies to obtain electoral benefits are developed, which contribute to the activation and mobilization of electorates (Claassen, 2011; Craig *et al.*, 2005; Gerth and Siegert, 2012), a debate on main issues of public politics is also produced, which contributes to foster attitudes and ways of thinking in citizens (Claassen, 2011; Weisberg and Nawara, 2010).

It has been widely determined the existence of a close relationship between possessing an acceptable amount of knowledge and having a greater tendency to participate (Buendía and Somuano, 2003; Norris, 2000; Rojas, 2006); something that also occurs in the electoral field. Usually, voters who possess a greater amount of political knowledge, and above all, a knowledge about the matters debated in campaign, tend to involve themselves more and more, using the information available during the electoral campaigns in their final decision (Singh and Roy, 2014). Therefore, they should become educated and rational voters, who after reflecting upon the different proposals of candidates they chose the party or candidate they consider most reasonable (Catellani and Alberici, 2012; Claassen, 2011; Dassonneville and Dejaeghere, 2014). Even with all that, aspects such as a strong identification with a certain party or prior political developed attitudes which the more sophisticated citizens possess, could moderate the influence of campaign (Zaller, 1992).

Paying attention to what occurs during campaign determines the existence of citizens with a campaign awareness, similarly to the citizens who possess greater or lesser political awareness. Hence, some authors understand this awareness concerning the matters debated on campaign as the manifestation of an electoral political sophistication (Schuck *et al.,* 2013; Van Heerde *et al.,* 2006). This is a multidimensional concept which measures the degree of affective compromise, that is, the citizens' interest in the development of the electoral campaign, which as has been observed increases the recognition of aspects debated during the electoral campaign (Hollander, 2005). But also the cognitive compromise, that is, the degree of campaign knowledge, before the civic knowledge, normally measured through questions about the political stances the different candidates have regarding the matters debated in the electoral battle or about their specific programmatic proposals (Claassen, 2011; Hansen and Pedersen, 2014; Hollander, 2005; Rhee, 1997; Thorson, 2014; Van Heerde *et al.*, 2006).

Explanatory factors of political sophistication

It is usual to find in the literature of disciplines such as political sciences or communications, studies which have tried to establish which factors influence the increase or reduction of the citizens' political knowledge and political sophistication (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Hollander, 2014; Luskin, 1990; Popa, 2015; Zaller, 1992). The results of such researches propose a variety of elements which have an impact on the interest and political knowledge, and determine the degree of political sophistication held by the

citizen. Even from his seminal work, Luskin (1990) noted the three main factors which determined the degree of sophistication. In this sense, it can be assumed that the sophisticated citizen is s/he who possess a cognitive *ability*, that is, tools to acquire and process the information of their sphere as well as an *opportunity* to be able to acquire that information; factors which determine how easily a citizen learns about their political sphere (Elenbaas *et al.*, 2014; Gordon and Segura, 1997).

Finally, Luskin (1990) pointed as a significant factor *motivation* or the citizen's desire to learn about what occurs in their sphere. This aspect explains to a large extent the individuals' seeking and paying attention to information in order to understand what occurs in the system. The fact of having an inherent motivation to stay informed combined with an acceptable amount of available information through sources such as media, clearly influences the citizen's process of learning, contributing to structure their political knowledge (Elenbaas *et al.*, 2014). For this reason, motivation has been associated as the degree of interest citizens possess regarding politics (Elenbaas *et al.*, 2014; Popa, 2015). Under this assumption, a lack of motivation would suppose the first barrier to the process of acquiring information (Prior, 2005) rather than the lack of information and abilities held by the citizen to process it.

Now, even though these variables *motivation* or *ability* may have a greater impact in the generation of political sophistication than in the one related to the research of information (Luskin, 1990; Prior, 2005), the citizen, undoubtedly, needs to obtain information to structure their comprehension and knowledge about what occurs inside the system. In this research, Luskin (1990) included the consumption of conventional media, whose influence has been extensively studied.

In the case of the press, it has been constantly perceived that its consumption has a positive effect in the increase of the citizen's sophistication (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gordon and Segura, 1997; Guo and Moy, 1998; Hollander, 2005; Popa, 2015; Rhee and Cappella, 1997); in the case of television, it has been observed that its consumption has a negative influence in the generation of political knowledge (Gordon and Segura, 1997; Guo and Moy, 1998; Rhee and Cappella, 1997). Nonetheless, other studies have found positive relationships regarding television consumption (Hollander, 2005; Popa, 2015) mainly due to the sort of contents received through this medium.

Thus, a difference is observed between the exposition to media and the attention to particular contents offered by them, such as news, political

programs or electoral debates (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Muñiz, 2012; Rojas, 2006). In that regard, some authors note that the mere generic exposition to media is a weak sign of the citizen's political learning and knowledge (Rhee and Cappella, 1997). Hence, we must pay more attention to the selective exposition to political contents, that is, attention to politics through conventional media. This variable has been pointed as a strong factor which accounts for the increase of political knowledge in citizens (Hollander, 2014; Rhee and Cappella, 1997; Rojas, 2006), and even in audiences rather unmotivated in which a passive learning can be produced from the casual exposition to such contents (Prior, 2005). This positive effect has been also perceived in electoral contexts, usually both attention to politics through conventional media (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Thorson, 2014) as well as attention to electoral debates held during the campaign (Drew and Weaver, 2006; Druckman and Leeper, 2012) contribute to increase the knowledge about the matters debated and about the personal characteristics of candidates.

The advent of new media, in their different presentations, is slowly producing a migration of audiences from conventional media to online resources (Woolley *et al.*, 2010). Hence, authors such as Hollander (2014) remind us that in the new studies on political culture it is necessary to include items related to activities such as reading or the use of news and contents online since they constitute factors which explain the citizens' political attitudes. Thus, several authors say that media and social networks are becoming for a great number of citizens a crucial resource in order to follow the political information and, therefore, to generate political knowledge (Cho *et al.*, 2009; Drew and Weaver, 2006; Hollander, 2014). This is because their consumption is not as demanding as other conventional media, which enables the user of such media to look for more active information thanks to a process of comparison between media contents; this has suggested that a levelling effect of the users' political knowledge can be generated (Hollander, 2014; Prior, 2005). Such positive effect of the consumption of contents of the new media about political knowledge has been also identified in electoral campaigns (Drew and Weaver, 2006; Partheymüller and Faas, 2015; Woolley *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, the literature has also suggested an important effect on the knowledge and political sophistication of the variable related to the discussion or political conversation held among citizens, understood as a crucial variable for the political democratic development (Cho *et al.*, 2009; Rojas, 2006; Thorson, 2014). It should be reminded that the citizens'

communicative practices do not circumscribe to media consumption, but also to the processes of intra and interpersonal reflection, generally understood as the political dialogue through conversation, which can have an impact by managing to make changes in the citizens' political attitudes. Thanks to these strategies of exchange of interpersonal or even interactive information through digital platforms (Yamamoto *et al.*, 2015) the political learning can be increased, serving this conversation as a catalyst factor of the civic deliberative education (Gastil and Dillard, 1999). This is how, for instance, Thorson (2014) presents it, when finding that the exposure to news and the political discussion had a positive impact in the campaign knowledge held by citizens.

From the empirical records examined, the following questions were determined regarding the explanation of factual and electoral political sophistication:

RQ1: At what extent does attention to politics through conventional media (a), watching electoral debates (b), use of web pages about politics (c), use of the social networks Facebook and Twitter (d), and the interactive political conversation (e) contribute to increase factual political sophistication?

RQ2: At what extent does attention to politics through conventional media (a), watching electoral debates (b), use of web pages about politics (c), use of the social networks Facebook and Twitter (d), and the interactive political conversation (e) contribute to increase electoral political sophistication?

In addition, and bearing in mind that is a comparative exploratory work among three different electoral processes (*vid infra*), the following research question was applied to explanatory models of factual and electoral political sophistication:

RQ3: Were these influences identical in the different studied electoral contexts?

Methodology

This research presents an explanatory methodological design under the analytical survey method, which not only does it represent broad groups of populations but aims among other objectives, to look for associations between variables and their patterns of behavior, determine their directionality, prove hypotheses and generate new hypotheses in an experimental design way but with statistical controls as well. In order to widen the range of analytic contexts and contrast them, three contexts where elections were held recently, were chosen: the Mexican states of Nuevo Leon, Puebla and Mexico, in all

three such analytical survey was carried out in a convenience sample of users of social networks.

In this sense, Facebook users from the three states were invited to participate in an *online* survey, which was promoted as advertising in this social network. The field work was carried out immediately after the gubernatorial elections in each state: in Nuevo Leon after the elections of June 7th during the months of June and July, 2015; in Puebla after the elections of June 5th, from June to July, 2016; and in the State of Mexico after the elections of June 4th, from June to July, 2017. From the data obtained only the answers from people with legal age (≥ 18 years) and registered as voters in the three states where the research was carried out were taken into account. 51% of the sample in Nuevo Leon were women (*n*=152); 58% of the sample in Puebla were men (*n* = 176); in the State of Mexico 50.4% were women (*n* = 180). The participants in Nuevo Leon were between 18 and 67 years of age (*M* = 34.06, *DE* = 12.57), the participants in Puebla were between 18 and 77 years of age (*M* = 38.90, *DE* = 14.59) and the participants in the State of Mexico were between 18 and 71 years of age (*M* = 31.83, *DE* = 12.51).

Measures used

Attention to politics through conventional media. In order to know the degree of consumption of contents on politics in conventional media during the elections, the participants were asked how much they learned about the campaign through the following: news in newspapers, news in radio, news in television, political radio programs and political television programs. All of them were measured with a Likert scale ranging from nothing (1) to a lot (5). The scale was created from the sum of the five items mentioned above. The scale had a good internal consistency for all cases, the case in Nuevo Leon (α = .76), the case in Puebla (α = .77) and the case of the State of Mexico (α = .80).

Use of social networks during campaign. The survey respondents were asked how much they had used certain social networks to learn about the gubernatorial electoral campaign of each state. In short, the use of Facebook and Twitter was measured with a Likert scale ranging between nothing (1) to a lot (5).

Interactive political conversation. It was intended to know at what extent the respondents had had conversations about politics online, so it was used the scale Yamamoto *et al.* (2015) which uses five items, which evaluate activities such as "writing about political matters online" or "joining in

political discussions online." All were measured with five-point Likert scales ranging from nothing (1) to a lot (5). The scale was reliable for Nuevo Leon (α = .89), for Puebla (α = .89) and for the State of Mexico (α = .89).

Factual political sophistication In order to generate the indicator of factual political sophistication diverse proposals by prior different authors were used as a reference, those proposals suggested summing the measures of the respondents' interest and political knowledge so as to generate an indicator of political sophistication (Catellani and Alberici, 2012; Guo and Moy, 1998; Muñiz, 2012; Schuck *et al.*, 2013; Singh and Roy, 2014; Stevens, 2005). Firstly, it was measured the interest for politics the respondents from the different states had. With the Likert scales which ranged from nothing (1) to a lot (5), respondents were asked about their interest for local or municipal, state, national or federal and international politics. The scale produced by the sum of these items presented good reliability for the three states, Nuevo Leon (α = .72), Puebla (α = .83) and the State of Mexico (α = .71).

Regarding factual political knowledge, six questions were asked concerning the present Mexican and state political reality, determining whether the respondents answered correctly (1) or incorrectly (2) to questions such as: How long is the term for governor? With both variables the indicator of political sophistication was created taking as a reference the proposal of de Vreese *et al.* (2011), which consists in duplicating the importance given to the cognitive element compared with the affective element by using the following formula:

Political sophistication= ((political interest x ½) + (political knowledge) / 2

The new indicator had a theoretical rank of variation which ranged between 1.75 to reflect the maximum political sophistication and 0.25 to reflect the minimum political sophistication.

Electoral political sophistication. The same proposal was used to know the degree of the respondents' political sophistication about the electoral battle. The interest shown by the respondents for the gubernatorial elections of each state was measured with a five-point Likert scale which ranged from completely uninterested (1) to completely interested (5). In addition, the degree of electoral political knowledge shown by the respondents was also measured with five questions where respondents were required to choose which candidate had proposed certain thing. The responses were codified as: correct (1) or incorrect (0), following the same criteria for factual political knowledge. The same process for factual political sophistication was followed to create an indicator.

Control variables. Finally, the use of a series of control variables was considered, some sociodemographic and other political. Respondents were asked their gender (1=masculine; 2=feminine) and their age. They were also asked to indicate with a scale which ranged between less than 6,000 pesos (1) and more than 30,001 pesos (4), what their family's monthly income was approximately. And also their education level with a scale which ranged between unschooled (1) to postgraduate studies (7). Finally, they were asked to take an ideological stance, which ranged between leftist (0) to conservative (10).

Results analysis

In order to answer the questions mentioned above the explanatory factors for both the factual and electoral political sophistication were determined, in order to do so several hierarchical multiple linear regressions were used for each state. With this technique, which allows to incorporate the independent variables to the equation in different times, it is possible to create different explanatory models and identify the variations in the effect produced by the different predictor variables on the critically analyzed variables. In both cases, the control variables were incorporated in the first stage, constituted by different sociodemographic measured aspects (model 1), and immediately afterwards the variables related to the communicative habits observed were added, such were attention to politics through conventional media, watching electoral debates, the consumption of web pages about politics, the use of social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and the interactive political conversation (model 2). In this manner a control of impact of the sociodemographic variables was created, considering the results of lack of homogeneity among the samples mentioned.

Regarding the analysis on factual political sophistication (see Table 1)[2], the variables used in the regression confirmed the independent hypothesis concerning the dependent variable, considering that the value of the Durbin-Watson test was acceptable in all samples. In addition, problems of collinearity were not shown among the variables used in each equation. Concerning the results, in Nuevo Leon was observed that attention to politics through conventional media ($\beta = .123, p = .039$), watching electoral debates ($\beta = .142$, $p = .022$), use of Twitter ($\beta = .136$, $p = .026$), and especially interactive political conversation during the electoral campaign

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2 Tables are attached below in appendix (Editor's note.)

($\beta = .246$, $p < .001$) and the use of web pages about politics ($\beta = .277$, $p < .001$) contributed to increase political sophistication.

Concerning Puebla the explanatory variables were interactive political conversation ($\beta = .175$, $p = .009$), attention to politics through conventional media during electoral campaign ($\beta = .212$, $p < .001$), and mainly, use of web pages about politics ($\beta = .267$, $p < .001$). Finally, in the State of Mexico a positive impact was perceived in the use of Twitter ($\beta = .123$, $p = .025$), use of web pages about politics ($\beta = .200$, $p < .001$), and mainly, political conversation during campaign ($\beta = .208$, $p < .001$).

Now, the analysis of explanatory variables of electoral political sophistication (see table 2) confirmed the independent hypothesis concerning the dependent variable of all independent variables of all samples used, and no problems of collinearity were found either, which allowed to use all variables in the analyses made. Regarding the importance the variables about communicative habits had in explaining the electoral political sophistication in Nuevo Leon, the analysis showed four variables which had a statistically significant impact. Thus, use of Twitter ($\beta = .176$, $p = .003$), use of web pages about politics ($\beta = .218$, $p < .001$), interactive political conversation ($\beta = .252$, $p < .001$) and watching electoral debates ($\beta = .292$, $p < .001$) managed to impact consistently in the increase of political sophistication.

In Puebla, the results showed three explanatory variables which contributed to enhance the respondents' electoral sophistication: use of Facebook during the electoral campaign ($\beta = .161$, $p = .015$), watching debates ($\beta = .212$, $p < .001$) and the use of web pages ($\beta = .299$, $p < .001$). Lastly, watching debates ($\beta = .178$, $p = .002$), use of web pages ($\beta = .222$, $p < .001$) and interactive political conversation ($\beta = .207$, $p < .001$) during the electoral campaign in the State of Mexico contributed positively to increase the respondents' electoral sophistication.

Arguments and conclusion

The main objective of this research was to determine the degree in which each one of the considered communicative practices had an impact in determining the citizens' political sophistication, both factual and electoral. In sum, it was expected to evaluate the influence that factors such as attention to political contents through conventional means, watching electoral debates, use of web pages about politics, use of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and interactive political conversation had in the context of gubernatorial electoral campaign in the Mexican states of Nuevo Leon (2015), Puebla

(2016) and Mexico (2017). Consequently, the first question was focused on the analysis of explanatory factors of factual political sophistication, which emerges from the degree of interest for politics and the knowledge about the political system citizens have.

The results let us see a decrement in the impact attention to political contents through conventional media has, which was a variable that had usually been among the most important to determine the citizens' knowledge and political sophistication (Hollander, 2014; Muñiz, 2012; Prior, 2005; Rhee and Cappella, 1997; Rojas, 2006). Although in most elections, except in the State of Mexico, using these contents still contributed to increase political sophistication, it was observed that other communicative variables related to the digital sphere begin to take a highly explanatory place of this cognitive commitment of the citizen.

The use of web pages about politics such as having online conversations about politics contributed significantly to obtain more sophisticated citizens in the field of factual knowledge. Therefore, positive hypotheses proposed by other previous authors about the impact social media have in political knowledge are confirmed (Cho *et al.*, 2009; Hollander, 2014; Woolley *et al.*, 2010).

Concerning the second research question, it is observed that three were the communicative variables which are more likely to determine the citizens' political sophistication in the electoral field. In this sense, in all the studied electoral campaigns the political conversation in digital media, use of web pages about politics and watching electoral debates seem to be the factors which help citizens increase their interest for the events during campaign and develop greater knowledge about the candidates' proposals.

Consequently, the influence of using the contents through conventional media seems to decrease again, opposite to what other authors have found in previous studies (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Thorson, 2014). However, the hypotheses previously proposed by other authors about the positive influence of debate are confirmed as long as traditional space of campaign, and of the new media (Drew and Weaver, 2006; Druckman and Leeper, 2012; Partheymüller and Faas, 2015; Woolley et al., 2010).

Along with the study of explanatory elements of both factual and electoral political sophistication, in the third question was proposed whether the explanatory models to be obtained would vary according to the electoral studied context. Despite being from different states and years, the results show that there are similar patterns among the three samples in relation to the explanation of factual political sophistication.

In all three cases the main explanatory variables were those related to the use of web pages and interactive political conversation, and even the influence of attention to conventional media. For the explanatory model of the electoral political sophistication, a pattern which determines the impact of certain communicative variables is also found. The use of web pages and interactive conversation, and in this case, watching debates, all emerge as the same explanatory elements in the three states. There are only small differences among them with regard to the use of some social networks, which are considered in both types of sophistication.

The results reveal the importance Internet and social media are having in determining political attitudes, among them political sophistication. It is more than evident the role conventional media are still playing in the citizens' political learning, yet it is true that increasingly more citizens begin to use different digital platforms to inform themselves about politics (Drew and Weaver, 2006), especially during electoral processes (Partheymüller and Faas, 2015; Woolley *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, this seems to be the new scenario where citizens become deep processors of political contents mentioned by authors like Luskin (1990) or Prior (2005). Thus, the results obtained allow to assume that a great part of highly sophisticated citizens are learning information through web pages about politics, subsequently they reflect upon that information through strategies of political conversation online.

Indeed, Internet has given political actors a great opportunity to spread their political discourse, considering that the new media break the barriers between producer and consumer and the discourses of the different actors are highly interrelated among themselves. Although conventional media are still a main source of information, especially television which is a much consumed medium, Internet has begun to be a mechanism highly effective to transmit political information and have an impact in the citizens' knowledge.

Particularly in young people, who are more familiar with the use of media and social networks, and for whom a large amount of information about elections comes through Internet (Woolley *et al.*, 2010). It is for this reason that it is necessary to keep doing research about the access to politics through Internet in this sector of society, since it is in this age group that the impact social networks have may be more explicit than what was found in this research concerning population in general.

Scholars have widely argued that those who are more sophisticated tend to change less their opinions by the influence of media, and are less influenced by advertising during campaign since they have richer associative information networks than those who are less sophisticated (Lee and

Chang, 2011; Miller, 2011; Zaller, 1992). This sort of hypothesis may lead to cast doubt on the results obtained in the research in the sense of whether or not the consumption of politics through Internet is breaking the barriers between high and low sophisticated citizens, in a levelling process as the one proposed by Hollander (2014) or Prior (2005). In this sense, it is necessary to keep doing research about the differences shown in this new digital citizenry in order to determine at what extent media is influencing the way political knowledge is learned as well as how it is determining the degrees of political sophistication citizens have.

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Appendix

Table 1
Explanatory models of factual political sophistication

Research variables	Nuevo Leon (n = 294)		Puebla (n = 301)		State of Mexico (n = 357)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Respondent's sex (1= woman)	-.077	-.016	-.134*	-0.049	-.063	-.038
Respondent's age	-.040	.143*	.079	.074	.032	.047
Income	.144*	.138*	.033	.085	.155*	.056
Education level	.051	.076	.138*	.098	.149*	.151**
Political ideology (10= conservative)	.062	.092	-.010	-.052	-.001	-.009
Attention to conventional media		.123*		.212***		.085
Watching electoral debates		.142*		.084		.065
Use of web pages about politics		.277***		.267***		.200***
Use of Facebook		-.080		.117		.013
Use of Twitter		.136*		.073		.123*
Interactive political conversation		.246***		.175**		.208***
R^2 control variables	.040		.058		.071	
R^2 communication variables		.288		.365		.187
R^2 total		.328		.423		.258
D	2.06		1.84		1.85	

Note:: All variables were measured with five-point scales 1 (nothing) to 5 (a lot), except the one related to political sophistication which ranged between 0.25 (nothing) to 1.75 (a lot). The size of the sample changes for each particular analysis, depending on the number of lost cases in the variables used. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Explanatory models of electoral political sophistication

Variables of the research	Nuevo Leon (n = 294)		Puebla (n = 301)		State of Mexico (n = 357)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Respondent's sex (1= woman)	-.120	-.056	-.180**	-.133*	-.161**	-.161**
Respondent's age	-.026	.158**	-.029	.025	-.066	-.040
Income	.112	.091	.078	.132*	.046	-.043
Education level	-.033	.029	.046	-.002	.116	.137*
Political ideology (10= conservative)	.088	.099	-.076	-.090	-.105	-.106*
Attention to conventional media		-.047		.085		.056
Watching electoral debates		.292***		.212***		.178**
Use of web pages about politics		.218***		.299***		.222***
Use of Facebook		-.027		.161*		-.007
Use of Twitter		.176**		-.030		.024
Interactive political conversation		.252***		.058		.207***
$R^2_{control\ variables}$	.034		.052		.054	
$R^2_{communication\ variables}$	.331		.323		.206	
R^2_{total}	.366		.375		.260	
D	2.16		1.63		1.81	

Note: All variables were measured with five-point scales from 1 (nothing) to 5 (a lot), except the one related to political sophistication which ranged between 0.25 (nothing) to 1.75 (a lot). The size of the sample changes for each particular analysis, depending on the number of lost cases in the variables used. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

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