

The Liberalization Process of Satire in Postauthoritarian Democracies: Potentials and Limits in Mexico’s Network Television

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The potential of television satire, an important means of denunciation of abuses of power and incompetence by politicians, can be limited in post-authoritarian democracies, where previous arrangements between political elites and media may hinder what satirists can say and to whom. Drawing from the literature on satire in post-authoritarian regimes and on the liberalization of Mexican media, we explain the surge of satire in Mexican broadcast television and its limits. A further qualitative analysis of 274 jokes uttered in satirical shows broadcast between 1995 and 2019 demonstrates that, while the liberalization process fostered satirical expressions about the abuse of power, incompetence, and frivolity of politicians, the remaining instrumentalization practices led to self-censorship, officialdom, and futile humor. Hence, we conclude that the political-economic conditions that played a part in the political transition influenced the scope of Mexican television satire.

Keywords: transitional democracies; television satire; Mexico; political economy; political humor

To laugh at those in power is an act of subversion tolerated by elites and citizens only in certain places and at certain times. Political satire provides a license for transgression and, because of the importance of the rituals of power, with their solemn rhetoric and institutional rites, it is worth analyzing both the types of criticism made by satire and the domestic conditions that allow or hinder its expression. The latter is crucial since the mere existence of satirical performances does not necessarily promote critical thinking. On the contrary, political or economic constraints can neutralize satire’s critical edge and even help elites to reproduce the status quo (Aitaki, 2019).

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However, approaching satire through political economy has been rare. Through the study of “how power relations mutually constitute the production . . . of communication resources” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2), political economy can explain the attributes of satire particularly in post-authoritarian systems, where the media are no longer authoritarian but not yet fully democratic, and are therefore limited in terms of free speech (Voltmer, 2013).

The Mexican case is a good example, as the historical changes in media contents can be explained by two tendencies: the liberalization of the political regime, and the commercialization of media in the 1990s (Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002). With regard to the former, in an effort to legitimize its modernizing project after several decades in power, the authoritarian regime established by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) after the Mexican revolution increasingly recognized the rights of various political institutions, including the media. Political humor, which had tended to exist only in niche forms, such as cartoons or theater, opened up to the masses via broadcast television. Nevertheless, this liberalization process has seen regressions during the post-authoritarian period, as subsequent governments did not give up media instrumentalization (Espino, 2016). Likewise, increasing commercial vulnerability due to the arrival of alternative sources of information—competing broadcasting networks, cable television, and the Internet—boosted the struggle for ratings, and, hence, the production of political entertainment (Martin, Kaye, & Harmon, 2018).

With these lasting tensions, political satire suffered certain constraints in its expression. Whereas some case studies have examined satirical shows (Alonso, 2015; Rodelo, 2020), this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the objects of satire in Mexican television shows in the context of a post-authoritarian, nonconsolidated democracy that imposes conditions and limits on this television genre. Therefore, it pays special attention to satirical transgressions that signal the thresholds of freedom of expression. It observes which objects of satire are common (particularly in post-authoritarian regimes), but absent from the Mexican case—something that could signal political coercion or specific cultural appropriations.

Our theoretical framework includes a definition of *satire* and a review of the political objects usually criticized by this genre in democratic contexts. Next, satire is placed in post-authoritarian contexts, so we can highlight those objects of humor that are emphasized or deemphasized, and the barriers that producers face to freely expressing themselves.

The empirical work we present is based on the qualitative analysis of 274 jokes uttered in 13 satirical shows broadcast over the past 24 years on different programs and television networks. Our findings allow us to describe the objects of satire in the Mexican case, within the theoretical guidelines discussed.

Satire and Its Role in Post-Authoritarian Political Systems

Satire is a form of comedy that has four key elements (Becker, 2012): (1) laughter (when ridicule toward its political object is provoked in audiences; LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014); (2) the signaling and censoring of human folly, vice, shortcomings, or stupidity (Alonso, 2015); (3) denaturalization of the social order (by distorting or exaggerating the familiar in a way that invites a clearer perception or understanding of reality, contrasting it with social norms; Martin et al., 2018); and, finally,

(4) aggression (i.e., attacking someone in a diminishing, contemptuous or derogatory way; LaMarre et al., 2014). Aggression, or even malice (Freeman, 2009), gives satire its corrosive quality and separates the genre from softer types of humor, which can be achieved without denigrating the object being made fun of.

As a mode of communication, satire is present in various media genres in the fiction (e.g., soap operas) and nonfiction domains (e.g., newscasts) in an array of forms that vary by their tone—pleasant or Horatian, bitter or Juvenalian—target the elites or society in general (LaMarre et al., 2014), and, more crucially, their intended consequences for civic life. Consequently, there could be either pseudo-satire, cynically ridiculing the government elite (i.e., their personalities, rather than their ideas) for the sake of a quick joke (McClennen & Maisel, 2014; Peterson, 2008), or productive satire—authentic in its critique and intent to generate insight, indignation, and mobilization among the citizenry. In the latter, there is room for satire to resemble or even surpass journalism in its contribution to the public sphere.

Furthermore, satire exposes and tests the limits of public speech and the tolerance of authority for divergent political opinions and derogatory expressions (Kuhlmann, 2012). Therefore, it is a type of message that pushes the boundaries of political expression, committing transgressions on the basis of trial and error. In liberal societies where freedom of expression is guaranteed, satire poses a rational problem for creators who must decide what degree of aggressiveness is acceptable to audiences that may, for example, hold a certain individual in high respect. In an authoritarian and even post-authoritarian regime, by contrast, satire can mean a threat to the legitimacy or acceptance of the authority, and, as such, might not be tolerated (Freeman, 2009). Understanding this problem requires observation of the different practices of censorship and self-censorship by the authorities, media organizations, and creators in respect of possible acts of transgression. The differences are clear when we look at the functions that satire performs and those that are not allowed or are severely restricted in less liberal regimes.

In principle, satire can be directed at society at large, making fun of its language, norms, and customs (Holbert et al., 2011). However, the main focus of satirists has been on the satire that targets those who hold power, particularly the elites, the government, and, in recent decades, the media establishment itself. In the Bakhtinian tradition, satire is a vernacular resource for directing criticism or for “mocking the politicians with the language of the street” (Dinc, 2012, p. 363) outside the formal venues for political dissent or criticism, usually out of reach of the common folk. It functions as a space of resistance against power, an alternative reality where the hierarchical and official order is temporarily suspended. The satirist embodies fearlessness, makes the powerful look ridiculous, and, thus, vulnerable. In this way power is subverted, its authority undermined (Dinc, 2012).

It follows that the objects of satire can be specific political actions or events, political ideas—their absurdity or the limits of their rationality (Aitaki, 2019)—and, above all, politicians themselves. Many functions of satire are underscored in the literature, but the most common are the denunciation of abuses of power—mainly corruption, highlighting a lack of expertise or common sense, unmasking the authorities’ demagoguery, hypocrisy or lies, and exposing follies (Holbert, 2013).

As we shall see below, context plays a role in how these functions of satire are performed.

Satire in Post-Authoritarian and Transitional Settings

Satire's function as a space of resistance is especially complex in post-authoritarian countries, as the fierce control of the past slowly readjusts to make way for more liberties, and where the previous authoritarian elites, while not hegemonic, are still active and exert considerable power (Voltmer, 2013). Satire seems an adequate form of political expression in those constrained spaces, where "open and direct debates are restricted" (Kuhlmann, 2012, p. 299), or where a healthy democratic debating tradition is still in its infancy (Baym & Jones, 2012). Nevertheless, the emergence of obstacles and limits on what satirists can say is inescapable.

A common feature of satire in regimes in transition is that deference toward politicians is still present, and any critique is carefully balanced between groups or parties so as not to offend any of them. At the beginning of the Spanish transition, satirical shows in that country made sure that, as the party in office was critiqued, other parties were critiqued, too (Valhondo-Crego, 2011). On the other hand, some vested powers were still not touched by satirists via self-censorship mechanisms. In Spain's constitutional monarchy, the Crown is not mocked, while it has been the subject of ridicule in recent British satire (Valhondo-Crego, 2011); in Orbán's Hungary, while the program *Weekly Seven* constantly mocks political elites (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2015), satire is toothless or ambiguous when it is directed against official policy (Imre, 2012); and in Putin's Russia, references to the president are either "flattering or neutral at best" (Semenenko, 2018, p. 263).

In some countries, shifts in political leadership can give way to drastic changes in broadcasting regulations, threatening the continuity of satirical projects beyond the current election cycle. This circumstance makes Hungarian satirists, for example, very careful not to offend anyone, and they have become adept in self-censorship strategies (Imre, 2012). Satirists in Turkey—a more authoritarian regime—must be as ambiguous as possible, which they do by encoding their expressions. This way, they can avoid censorship and lawsuits from politicians while still reaching a wide audience and commercial success (Dinc, 2012).

Politicians may also co-opt satirical spaces by using them as showcases to brand their image and influence the national conversation, especially "among the demographics that do not tend to attend to news" (Baym & Jones, 2012, p. 11). Sometimes, as in Russia, the appearance of politicians in satirical shows becomes a pop-politics strategy in their campaigns or propaganda endeavors (Semenenko, 2018).

The practices described above may render satire useless in terms of its subversive nature. Critics have long said that contemporary satire has a rather normalizing effect and thus reaffirms the already established hierarchical power structures because it eases the general discomfort and social unrest just temporarily (Dinc, 2012; Valhondo-Crego, 2011). Furthermore, the aforementioned features can lend extra weight to this rather conservative function of satire when it reinforces prejudices about certain social groups, while corporate power stays out of its reach. Additionally, a tepid attack by satirists in these contexts can "backfire" when satire "does not make full use of its critical edge and, instead of bringing the target down, it makes the attack milder . . . [rendering] humor a non-threatening mode" (Aitaki, 2019, p. 3). Also, since the media in transitional democracies are vulnerable to instrumentalization by the political and economic

elite, satire could be used to undermine trust in the new regime, or a rival faction, or even as a form of extortion (Baym & Jones, 2012).

That is not to say that satire does not have limitations in advanced democracies. The level of substance of American satirical shows (i.e., issue discussion or qualifications of the candidates) tends to be low (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007), while European programs are prone to simplify the issues into binary positions, and emphasize conflict, emotion, and personalization (Ödmark, 2018). These characteristics, though, seem to imply limits for contemporary satire (more on that later) rather than constraints exerted by the political and media systems.

These insights form the backdrop of our empirical case. Political humor has had a long but obscure presence in the Mexican media as the authoritarian regime in power for several decades controlled its expression. Political satire existed in certain media, although it was severely limited in its aggressive edge and in the spectrum of objects mocked, as certain institutions (most notably the presidency and the army) were shielded against any form of disrespect. Nonetheless, after the 1990s, satire entered into the mainstream and was established as a significant form of entertainment. The next sections explain how satire gained prominence in television, what forces engendered and shaped it, and, finally, which of the post-authoritarian traits mentioned were present at the outset of the transition and still there later.

Television Satire in Mexico

Political humor has been present in the mass media in Mexico for decades, as there had been a rich tradition of political satire, on the one hand, in print media (mainly through political cartoons) and, on the other hand, in stage shows such as the Mexican *carpas* (Barajas & Valdés, 2016). However, despite the fact that during the 20th century, cinema was “one of the main showcases of the [Mexican] culture of humor” (Barajas & Valdés, 2016, p. 12), the production of political satire films was minimal. Any form of political satire on television was subject to government censorship, too. The explanation of the above lies in the authoritarianism of the Mexican political regime. Thus, political satire on television only arrived during the transition to democracy and in conditions that should be specified.

Though we acknowledge that the performance of this mode of communication could be explained by micro factors—such as the roles, motivations and goals of comedians, or meso factors, as format rules and organizational pressures toward innovation and audience maximization—macro perspectives are central for observing historical developments and inferring patterns applicable to other cases. In this level of analysis, it is proposed that several macro dimensions explain the rise of television satire in any given country. A first explanation is that the formats of these shows “travel” abroad, and were exported from liberal countries to post-authoritarian ones, where they were adapted to the local idiosyncratic conditions as part of the global expansion of infotainment formats (Thussu, 2007). This has been the case in the previously mentioned countries, where British and American pioneer shows were key influences.

However, this explanation does not suffice, since some endogenous conditions must exist for these imported formats to thrive, in terms of audience response and commercial feasibility. In established democracies with ample political liberties and stable commercial conditions, a second explanation for the

success of political satire lies in the development of the right material and cultural conditions. An example of the former is the expansion of cable television (Baym, 2005), while the latter can be seen in the ascent of postmodernity—that is, a broad cultural shift that involves, among several trends, the increasing heterogeneity of publics, the commercialization of discourse, and the erosion of traditional epistemic authorities (such as journalists and scientists; Schultz, 2001).

But in post-authoritarian countries like Mexico, we should emphasize, as a third explanation, the political and economic dimensions. According to this framework, for satirical shows to exist (aggressive ones in particular), previous practices of censorship by the authoritarian regime and self-censorship strategies by entertainers should have been eased. Also, broadcasting regulations will have had to be liberalized, so a competitive market could arise. This would then allow additional genres and modes of discourse to have a chance to exist and thrive. To develop this explanation of the rise of television satire (a topic that has been neglected by media scholarship), we rely on an academic discussion of the rise of liberal journalism in Mexico, a fitting theoretical parallel, since both journalism and satire criticize power, are subject to censorship, and are produced by media organizations that are susceptible to be co-opted by the political and economic elites.

By the early 1990s, the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime that stemmed from the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) was almost depleted. An endogenous economic crisis in the mid-1980s and allegations of fraud in the presidential elections of 1988, in the wake of a surge of votes for opposition parties, forced President Carlos Salinas (1988–1994) to introduce deep political and economic reforms to “modernize” the country and, in this way, fortify the ruling party. A crucial step was to open the country to foreign trade and investment and joining the North American free-trade zone (NAFTA), in an attempt to integrate the country into a global, neoliberal economy (Lawson, 2002). This integration had several side effects for freedom of the press: It encouraged the coverage of Mexican politics by the American press, something that eased the pressure on the national press when it covered sensitive issues, as Mexican newspapers could now suddenly follow up shocking stories originally broken in foreign media (Lawson, 2002). It also committed the Mexican government, through a clause in NAFTA, to encourage freedom of the press and to remove previous mechanisms of control (Hernández, 2010). Further reforms in 1996 created an autonomous institution for the organization of elections, which introduced electoral equity and monitored media biases.

Privatization, a precondition for global economic integration, was rife and had an important expression in the selling off of the government’s television network to form Televisión Azteca in 1993, the first serious competitor in decades to the previously almighty lapdog Televisa (Lawson, 2002). It was then that real competition in broadcast television came in, and, eventually, Televisa had to rework its editorial policy to counter its falling credibility. On the other hand, the government’s investment in Mexican media was sharply reduced, which encouraged networks to adopt a market logic of competition and to bring in innovative formats. Procuring revenue for television meant, in this new scenario, the pursuit of ratings and advertisers more than closing ranks with high-ranking officials or politicians (Lawson, 2002).

The introduction of competition, along with a liberalized public space, opened the way to some provocative formats and styles, such as tabloid television shows and the infotainment coverage of politics,

on the basis of what was later called a market-driven journalism model (Hughes, 2006). But at the same time, it triggered a surge of political satire in commercial television, which expanded to various formats and media venues. It started with Azteca's *Hechos de peluche*, a 1996 puppet parody sketch based on Colombia's *Los reencauchados* and Spain's *Las noticias del guiñol*.

In this new competitive scenario, Televisa followed suit in an attempt to challenge its public image of officialdom by producing *Las mangas del chaleco*, a 10-minute pastiche of footage which mocked the absurd phrases uttered by politicians during the week. From then on, both television networks competed through several satirical formats: news satire programs such as *El mañanero* (2000) or *El notifiero* (2007), parodies such as *El privilegio de mandar* (2005 and 2017), and the talk show *Campañeando* (2011, 2015, 2018). Satire eventually spread outside the Televisa-Azteca duopoly: The long-awaited third Mexican network, Imagen, favored satirical news programs, while public television channels went for ideologically committed and left-leaning talk show satire.

We have already conceptualized satire as a form of aggressive humor that denounces abuses of power, highlights the incompetence of politicians, exposes their follies, or unmasks their hypocrisy. In theory, in a fully democratic country, Mexican satire should be performing these functions. However, a transition of regimes does not necessarily mean the end of previous media practices, nor that every new development will be in the service of citizens, as there are political and economic elites behind every regime that pressure, extort and co-opt to preserve their privileges (Guerrero & Marquez, 2014). So, in cases such as these, we can expect the functions of satire to be limited or performed in different, more selective ways.

According to scholars of journalism, the democratic transition engendered a market-driven model of journalism that combined a commercial ethos with practices of collusion between politics and the media. In this model, newsrooms show a lack of autonomy because what gets covered is subordinated to market pressures or corporate interests. Journalists monitor powerful actors "only when commercial ends are advanced or not threatened" (Hughes, 2006, p. 5), or are attentive to political actors in exchange for economic incentives (Espino, 2016); this is because journalists need to make a profit and they depend on advertisers, be it the private sector, political parties, or government entities. Scandals provide a good example of this kind of limitation. Government officials or legislators are most keenly scrutinized by the networks, in a tabloid and decontextualized style, either when they endanger corporate interests, or when some rival party-client has paid the media to report on them, but it is unlikely that they would have published these enquiries on their own (Hughes, 2006).

The conditions described show that in post-authoritarian democracies there can be several distorted practices that hinder the democratic performance of the media. With regard to satire, two anecdotes reveal similar problems. In 2004, a video exposing corruption was shown during a broadcast of Televisa's *El mañanero*, a news satire show anchored by Brozo the clown, that contributed to the electoral defeat of the then left-wing presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Following the presidential election in 2006, in the last episode of Televisa's *El privilegio de mandar*, one of the characters criticized Lopez Obrador for not accepting defeat, saying it was wrong to challenge the results of the elections "because that is how democracy works" (Rodríguez-Ajenjo, González, Sánchez, Herrera, & López, 2006b, 23:31).

Hence, although freedom of expression was widely assumed in the country after the political alternation of 2000, the main television company, Televisa, was accused of obtaining patronage benefits from the government that included favorable media regulation and distorting contents to favor its business goals. Further, both companies in the duopoly, Televisa and Azteca, began to receive ample resources from the political parties, federal and subnational governments via clientelistic advertising expenditure that peaked during Enrique Peña Nieto's term (2012–2018).

To sum up, the Mexican case reflects a process of profound changes that paved the way for political satire. All the same, the political freedom engendered by the transition is still constrained by the media system's authoritarian heritage and by a market-driven model of media operation that makes it easy for elites to instrumentalize the media, making satire against some actors particularly aggressive, and keeping it mild against others. These antecedents may lead to the practices described in the previous section: selective criticism, deference toward some political actors, toothless satire, economically motivated balance, and co-optation. Nevertheless, there may still be a reaction against these practices, and criticism may arise from the results of the political transition, along with the other critical functions of satire we have commented on.

For empirical purposes, we summarize our inquiry in the following question:

RQ: How does the path of the transition, in terms of changing political and economic arrangements, constrain satirical critique in Mexican broadcast television during the 1995–2019 period?

Method

This study aims to explore the role of television political satire in Mexico from a qualitative perspective. To achieve this, we sought to identify the objects and techniques of humor most used in the selected sample, and to observe the changes and continuities in this over time. Hence, rather than appropriating categories and variables from research agendas that frame the topic according to the features of particular contexts, the coding of jokes was carried out following the precepts of grounded theory (Strauss, 2003).

Sampling of Programs and Episodes

After a review of the literature and consultations with experts from academia and media industry, 17 television political satire shows airing on broadcast television in Mexico in the period 1995–2019 were identified. In the absence of a public television archive, episodes from 13 programs were sampled for analysis as a result of their availability on YouTube at the time of the study. The sampling was carried out following a strategy of purposeful sampling by quotas: A catalog of all the videos that exceeded 10 minutes in length was compiled; two episodes were randomly selected per program per year. Thus, 52 episodes were watched to identify the political jokes and transcribe them. This strategy assumes that the type of culture on display is detected not only by adding up large samples, but can be seen in the contents of each case (McHoul, 2001). Therefore, rather than looking for statistical representativeness, the sampling was intended to capture features of jokes that are constant in the programs and that should therefore emerge even in small samples.

Thus, the unit of analysis was the joke about political actors ($n = 274$). Our criteria to identify the units were: (1) Something is said or done to provoke laughter or to entertain; and (2) the joke has as its target some identifiable political actor, be it individual (e.g., the president) or collective (e.g., parties, unions).

Coding Procedure and Reliability Procedures

The categories emerged inductively when identifying themes in the readings of the corpus. Although the categories were not taken directly from the existing theory, the coding was guided by our knowledge of the literature on the subject. The coding procedure of Strauss (2003) was followed in its three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Once the categories were consolidated, their meanings were described, establishing the theoretical connections between them.

Unit identification and transcripts were made by two research assistants, while the coding was independently established by each of the authors. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, a meeting was held to check the categories found as well as their meanings. Disagreements on coding and interpretation were resolved through open discussion.

Results

The following describes the characteristics of the political satire broadcast on Mexican network television during 1995–2019, and its transformations. To facilitate this exposition, a distinction is made between the period 1995–1999, still considered authoritarian, although already in its death throes; 2000–2011, an initial post-authoritarian period, in which freedom of expression was widely assumed and in which television networks were accused of committing abuses and seeking patronage benefits; and 2012–2019, a period characterized by the transfer of millionaire resources to the media via clientelistic advertising expenditure.

The results of the qualitative analysis of political satire programs are organized on the basis of four major themes: first, the lack of integrity of politicians; second, their incompetence and mediocrity in the exercise of power; third, their frivolity and urge to show off; and fourth, their physical appearance, mannerisms and sexuality. The presence of the four themes and the categories that comprise them varied according to the period in which the political satire program was broadcast.

Lack of Integrity of Politicians

The first theme points to the lack of integrity of politicians when competing for power against citizens and fellow politicians or exercising it, in particular their propensity for corruption, stealing, or using public resources for private purposes, as well as the cynicism with which they respond to accusations against them. Satirists sometimes mock the abuse of power of rulers; at other times, it is political parties and their fraudulent practices that are satirized.

Executive governments and legislators are criticized because of the way they abuse their power. In the 1995–1999 period, fewer records of this were identified; however, the nickname Cuatemochas,

chosen for the puppet representing Cuahtémoc Cárdenas, a left-wing politician from the opposition, hinted at the illegal practice of distributing perks. During the 2000–11 period, the fake news program *Mikorte informativo* used the trial against Jacques Chirac, in France, on corruption charges, to bring up the corruption of ex-president Vicente Fox: “It’s good they’re at least giving him a little fright. . . . Yes, that’s you they’re talking, my dear Fox” (Mikorteinformativo, 2011, 8:53).

References to corruption in the 2012–2019 period are richer and more varied: Politicians enjoy or engage in bribery and the diversion of resources from the treasury, and they are characterized as criminals. Likewise, their greed is repeatedly pointed out: Although they have well-paid positions, they aspire to obtain higher incomes. A prison guard in the parody show *El privilegio de mandar* mocked the convicted former governor Javier Duarte: “What’s up, fatty? What’s the matter with you now? You haven’t taken a bite out of your sandwich and you’re so good at taking bites, aren’t you?” (Rodríguez-Ajenjo, González, Sánchez, Herrera, & López, 2018a, 2:41).

Various styles of clientelism are insinuated, in particular influence peddling and the exchange of favors between politicians. For example, the way in which those who have provided support during electoral campaigns demand to be rewarded once the candidate is established in the government (period 2000–2011) or even exposing the explicit offer of money in exchange for favors (period 1995–2000), as in the following parody of former president Salinas:

No, Perfidio [Muñoz Ledo]. If you want to earn a million dollars, you have to say this phrase on the rostrum: “Honorable Honorable congress, we should release Raúl [Salinas, the president’s brother], who is in prison.” Are you in, or out? (Rudecindo Caldeiro y Escobiña, 2014, 9:40).

In the same way, in all three periods, abuse of power is expressed in terms of negligence: Rulers receive a salary, but do not go to their jobs or, if they do, they do not work. Negligence is also signaled when a ruler is parodied for transferring the management of his problems to authorities at another level. Accusations of negligence were frequent throughout the sample. For example, a parody of a television ad reinterpreted a party jingle: “Hey, Matraca Movement, we just take your money, we don’t do any work, we prefer to be idle, we just stir the pot; tick, tick, candlestick” (Rodríguez-Ajenjo, González, Sánchez, Herrera, & López, 2018b, 14:12).

Another object of satire is the lack of commitment of the rulers to their constituency, and their cynicism toward it. For example, members of Congress were criticized for being *finger raisers*—that is, focused on submissively obeying their party leaders in voting without attending to the interests of their constituents: In a late-night show that pioneered political commentary, Brozo the Clown cuts the traditional three kings’ cake while saying:

This is the slice for the Chamber of Deputies. There is no baby Jesus [a baby figurine placed at random in the cake]. Just little fingers. Lots of little fingers. The Chamber of Little Deputies. The little dolls have turned into little fingers. (Chekollynn, 2018, 0:18)

Cynicism also leads to insensitivity toward the problems of citizens, in particular those of insecurity and precariousness. This is exemplified on occasions when congressmen affirm that the increase in the minimum wage is sufficient, when in fact it is meager (period 2012–2018); or when they respond with indifference to questions about corruption. Examples of the latter proliferated: a governor being indifferent to criticism of the overindebtedness of his state; congresspeople having members of their family in various public positions; or the shameless way in which president Carlos Salinas intended to profit from a corruption scandal.

Another political actor frequently criticized for their lack of integrity and their propensity for cheating are political parties. Satirists emphasize their inclination to violate the law through various tricks, either in internal party elections and external polls with biased procedures or in elections (2012–2019). A common feature is attempting to feign integrity in cunningly flawed processes—that is, through simulation. Journalists in a political talk show commented on the manipulation of the electorate: While showing a leaflet with a survey question (with politician Miguel Mancera in the background, and his name in large letters and the rest of the possible answers in very small font size), Carolina Rocha reads: “Andrés Manuel says his favorite is Mancera; who would you vote for?” She adds: “But who’s going to read the small print?” (*Campañeando*, 2012, 13:36).

Another accusation against political actors is their opportunistic search for positions at the expense of a sense of responsibility and political conviction. Opportunism takes the form of party switching and *chapulineo*. Party switching was satirized in the parody show *El privilegio de mandar*:

Manuel Camacho: Andrés Manuel, every day there are more tricolors [members of PRI] who want to switch to our party.

López Obrador: They are following your example, Camacho. Before, you were tricolor and, now, you are with the Aztec sun [a reference to PRD’s logo].

Manuel Camacho: Because I followed your example, Andrés Manuel. You were also tricolor.

López Obrador: Yes, and I followed the example of engineer Cárdenas. (Rodríguez-Ajenjo, González, Sánchez, Herrera, & López, 2006a, 0:06)

As a form of disloyalty to citizens, the *chapulineo* (literally, “grasshoppering”)—that is, when a politician abandons a public office to assume another position in the government, generating the impression that he/she lives off politics—is another satirized trait:

Street vendor: But what a mess these people in the government are: the deputy from the Ministry of the Interior [Gobernación] leaves and the deputy from Labor comes in, so Labor is left with no rule [*gubernación*]. . . . And they all leave their work half finished just so they can earn their daily bone. The bastards! They are capable of selling their own mother for a bloody bone. (Rodríguez-Ajenjo, González, Sánchez, Herrera, & López, 2018b, 10:12)

Parties are also satirized for acts of cynicism during campaigns when they make easy, openly clientelistic, or unrealistic campaign promises. Furthermore, the lack of integrity of the parties was criticized in satire against extortion and the purchase of votes during elections.

Incompetence and Mediocrity in the Exercise of Power

According to satirists, politicians are greatly incompetent in the exercise of power, which is seen in their intellectual limitations, and their lack of logic and knowledge. This second theme was hardly touched on in the 1995–1999 period, rarely from 2000 to 2011, but has been more frequent in the most recent period, including references both to low-ranking and to the most powerful political actors, such as the president. President Peña Nieto's public speaking blunders and shallowness are pointed out in countless jokes: "Mr. President, we have found several *yacimientos* [oil deposits]." "That's why I love Christmas," says the president. "No, those are *nacimientos* [Nativity displays]. I meant oil fields" (Rodríguez-Ajenjo et al., 2018a, 3:10).

Attention-Seeking and Frivolity

As a third theme, satirical programs deride the displays of frivolity by public officials and candidates. In the 2001–2011 period, they mocked the physical attractiveness of then candidate Peña Nieto, calling him a telenovela candidate with sex appeal. Talk show hosts also made fun of the monotony and superficiality in the politicians' rhetoric:

Host Garza: I can predict that he is going to say the same as yesterday—he is only going to change the place!

Peña Nieto: [as a reflection in the Evil Queen's mirror]: Make me yours . . . Make me yours . . . Make me yours . . .

Host Garza [laughing]: He said it again in the summer! "Make me yours"—again!

Host Gálvez: We have already seen that what he really wants is for them to make him theirs. (*Campañeando*, 2012, 8:43)

In the 2012–2018 period, other politicians with frivolous attitudes are scorned: a legislator who had been a singer and stripper, and who was appointed head of the Commission of Culture in the Senate; there was also a legislator from an opposition party excessively concerned about the House reimbursing her minimal expenses. The vulgarity of politicians is also criticized for their economic privileges, the way they dress and speak, and how protective they are of their (bad) ideas. The anchor of *El incorrecto*, a fake news program, made fun of an unrefined politician:

Layín, button up your shirt, you bast . . . [beep]! . . . Look [mayor Layín appears on the screen dressed in an open-collared shirt]. The first button is elegant, the next button is cool. Then comes the old drunkard, and then the button for the flasher and finally the button for the rapist uncle. Or old clown, Layín. . . . Sodding bast . . . [beep]!, you filthy old man. That's the last button. (Telemundo, 2015, 6:11)

Other examples of attention-seeking included a presidential candidate who, they say, held positions in different posts with the purpose of positioning himself (1995–1999), an official who bragged about the publication of his book, and a parody of then-candidate López Obrador that highlighted his desire for media visibility (2000–11): “The first part of *El privilegio de mandar* is over and I have not appeared. This . . . [takes a deep breath] smells like a conspiracy. . . . I want to appear. I have to be the main protagonist” (Rodríguez-Ajenjo et al., 2006a, 9:21).

More recently, in 2018, the government’s attempts to make its austerity policies shine were satirized. The politician López Obrador (presidential candidate in 2006 and 2012, and president elected for the period 2018–2024) has also been criticized for being intolerant of criticism and satire. Political satire shows characterize such a trait as undemocratic, out of proportion, and hypersensitive.

Humor About Sexuality, Physical Appearance, and Mannerisms

Sexual humor has been a frequently used resource for humor, much more during the later periods than in 1995–1999. Sexual humor commonly makes innuendos about the genitals of male politicians and their sexual behavior (with oblique references to erections, masturbation, and intercourse). These insinuations are usually associated with the subjugation of female political actors, as frequently displayed in the humor of seasoned fake news show host Brozo the Clown. In a show, he jabbers: “How good that he has an assistant and that she is very happy, and that she is very well paid, and that she sits on Muñoz Ledo’s *thing!*” Quietly, her partner rectifies: “On Muñoz Ledo’s congressional seat” (Vela, 2010, 6:25).

Another resource is humor about physical appearance and mannerisms, particularly physical defects, but also ways of speaking and dressing. During 1995–1999, this kind of satire was mild: *Hechos de peluche*’s puppets lightheartedly parodied the image of politicians, making reference, for example, to the ears of former president Carlos Salinas. From 2000 onward, this type of humor became less docile and even aggressive: the emaciated appearance of a female politician, the short stature and baldness of president Felipe Calderon, the old age of a trade union leader, the mustache of the president, the obesity of an official (likened to a whale in public television’s *La maroma estelar*) and even the ugliness of the leader of the teachers’ union. Several jokes about physical appearance were directed at left-wing politician López Obrador: his accent, his sluggish speech, and his old-fashioned way of dressing. These defects are often used as a source of humor without being associated with any character trait or any form of abusive or mediocre exercise of power.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article shows how television satire has performed in the setting of post-authoritarian Mexico, and whether specific features of political economy stemming from the country’s transition toward democracy have encouraged or hindered the possibilities of satirical criticism.

As explained in the article, Mexican television satire denounces abuses of power, highlights the incompetence of politicians, and exposes their follies. The political liberalization allowed a new field of political expression and criticism different to that of the years before party alternation. Although to start with, self-censorship practices continued (e.g., presidents were not even represented in satire programs before 2000),

producers and executives soon became bolder and the temerity of satire increased swiftly. Thus, the democratic functions of satire entered the television landscape and opened up unprecedented liberties. Its aggressive and transgressive edges increased through time and came into full swing particularly in recent years, as political pluralism consolidated and new media competitors—including a third television network, Internet streaming, and cable television—gained market share and put serious competitive pressure on entertainment formats (Martin et al., 2018).

As an example of the progress of television satire, while abuses of power were only tepidly and more ambiguously mentioned in the 1995–1999 period, from 2012 to 2019 such references were more frequent, varied, and concrete. Governors and congresspeople in particular are now mocked for their corruption, negligence, and indifference. In a bitter and cynical way, officials are portrayed as being detached from the public interest and as looking for office only to advance their interests of power and fortune. Political parties are mocked in especially aggressive ways, since satirists underscore their lack of integrity and public commitment, their disregard for the law, and outright trickery. Similarly, references to political incompetence, ignorance, and bigotry are absent from the 1995–2000 period, but they grow through 2001–2011 and are widespread in 2012–2019. They are made against officials and governors from every party and ideology. Criticism of the intolerance and egotism of left-wing president Lopez Obrador in 2018 is a powerful sign of transgression, since presidents in office had been exempted from being spoofed in television before Vicente Fox's term (2000–2006), and the first parodies merely recovered their mannerisms and clumsiness.

In sum, creators seem to bemoan the decadence of the political class. Perhaps they do not deliberately undermine the new regime, but they end up presenting a cynical and gloomy portrayal of leadership in the country. Unlike what happened in other post-authoritarian countries (Dinc, 2012; Ibrahim & Eltantawy, 2017; Kuhlmann, 2012), Mexican satire did not render itself toothless or ambiguous (as in Hungary), deferential toward government elites (as in Russia), or cautious so that nobody is offended (as in Spain or Turkey)—with certain exceptions. In some ways, Mexican television shows resemble the satirical practices and functions of advanced democracies.

Nevertheless, the use of certain resources depoliticizes satire's critical edge and puts limits on its potential. Firstly, frivolity, vulgarity, and vanity, three recurrent themes, do express a distance between people and power elites, and the frequent transgression of codes of conduct by public officials. But criticisms of these traits fail to explicitly tie character flaws to the way they distort governance or turn into abuses of power, reducing or even preventing satire's aggressive edge and, hence, limiting its contribution to public accountability.

Secondly, the creators' resources of humor do not seem to have yielded any profound criticism, particularly in the latest period (2012–2018). Though sexual humor and mockery of physical appearance could be, in theory, a way to vilify structural asymmetries of power and to subvert power, their use in the studied sample cannot be read as criticism of sexual misconduct or gender discrimination by politicians—ironically contributing to the perpetuation of sexism in Mexican society. Moreover, while mockery of physical appearance and mannerisms might be considered a question of style, they indicate, nonetheless, a less aggressive edge toward politicians and an attack not directed against their public roles, but their personal traits.

Thirdly, high ranking officials still escape satire. President Peña Nieto was never mentioned in a show whose anchor was the finance minister's sibling. Criticisms against the current president Lopez Obrador are irregular. For example, public channels do not satirize him, even though they claim to have editorial independence. And although private networks criticize him for certain traits, any suggestions of incompetence or abuse of power are absent from their jokes. Although these examples are insufficient to corroborate an attempt to instrumentalize satire shows—either by the president or other actors—they constitute evidence that some degree of officialdom or deference is still present in Mexican television.

Finally, contrary to what happened in other case studies that featured alternative actors, such as media, as targets of satire, in the Mexican observed programs, neither corporate misconduct nor media performance is subject to criticism. This is a stark absence that implies only politicians are to blame for the problems of transition, while ignoring elite actors who have historically lacked accountability and have been just as decisive as politicians in influencing policy.

The first two limits relate to the aforementioned conservative function of satire—entertaining audiences in a manner that is nonthreatening for the status quo, reinforces prejudices against certain groups, and lowers the potential of satire for reflective thinking and reasoned social engagement. Shallowness, self-referentiality, and cynicism, coupled with simplification and exaggerated conflict and emotion, are features of postmodern television satire, even in advanced democracies, that have already been pointed out by media scholars (Colletta, 2009; Musaraj, 2018). But the latter problems express limits of television satire that are particular to the Mexican setting: Deference for officialdom, harmless humor, and the absence of criticism against untouched elites reveal that politics still interferes with the scope of satire, and that market incentives to develop a more aggressive edge have somehow been insufficient.

In conclusion, in a post-authoritarian country where political satire on television had been heavily censored by the government, the 25-year development of the genre in Mexico covered in this article can be considered progress, as satire has become an instrument for democracy by criticizing the abuses of power and the incompetence of politicians. Nonetheless, the precise political-economic conditions that played a part in the transition—particularly the power relations that have remained in place—constrain what satirists can say and about whom. Along with deficiencies common in postmodern societies, in post-authoritarian countries television satire is constantly on the edge of becoming a nonthreatening, toothless form of political expression—a pseudosatire, as previously conceptualized (Peterson, 2008). In further research, this could be confirmed through international comparisons between transitional democracies or even mature ones, given the potential of the political economy approach we used to contrast macro national cases.

Finally, we should admit a couple of limitations from this study: First, the sampling strategy carried out on YouTube to compensate for the absence of a proper television archive led us to miss out a few programs and episodes, skewing the sample toward available content. Second, our strategy of analysis, which focused on the qualitative analysis of transcripts of jokes, might have overlooked instances of nonverbal or physical humor. Further cross-sectional studies may provide a better chance to analyze a larger sample and delve into other symbolic manifestations of satire.

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