The Influence of TikTok on Political Campaigns in Mexico's State Capitals: Strategies, Interactions and Sentiment Analysis

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This study examines the influence of TikTok on political campaigns in Mexico's state capitals, focusing on strategies, user interactions, and sentiment analysis during the 2024 municipal elections (and Mexico City state-level election). The widespread popularity of TikTok among younger audiences, coupled with its algorithm-driven content and viral potential, has pushed candidates to adopt novel communication tactics. Drawing on all available TikTok videos from all state capital candidates, we analyze video metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, complemented by sentiment analysis using the RoBERTuito model.

Candidates with a pre-existing social media presence are likelier to exhibit higher engagement levels and broader audience reach, leveraging their influencer status to dominate interactions. Conversely, more traditional candidates faced challenges adapting to TikTok's fast-paced, entertainment-driven environment. Our findings reveal significant differences in how each candidate used hashtags, highlighting strategies ranging from self-promotion to leveraging political alliances and contrasting opponents.

Sentiment analysis of over two million comments reveals shifts in public perception during the campaign, with most candidates experiencing a rise in neutral feedback. The study also identifies a mix of organic interactions and potential bot activity, raising questions about the authenticity of engagement.

These findings underscore TikTok's growing role as a key platform in political campaigns, particularly for engaging younger voters. As campaigns increasingly embrace digital strategies, understanding TikTok's algorithmic nature, user behavior, and emotional resonance becomes essential. This research offers insights into how political actors navigate digital spaces and the potential implications of social media-driven campaigns in shaping electoral outcomes in Mexico.

1 Introduction

Social media analysis in Mexican politics has been ongoing for the past two decades. Research has focused on the political socialization processes facilitated by social media among the general population and examined the messages the political class conveys to the public through these platforms.

Regarding the first aspect, the 2012 presidential elections stand out as a key moment when the #YoSoy132 student mobilizations provided insights into the millennial electorate—educated, digitally connected, and young (Díaz Domínguez & Moreno, 2015). This movement even contributed to organizing a presidential debate broadcast on YouTube.

From the candidates' perspective, the intensive use of social media in political campaigns has been notable, particularly the role of Facebook in local elections. A key example is the 2015 gubernatorial campaign of Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, known as "El Bronco," in the state of Nuevo León (Howard et al., 2017).

Numerous studies have also examined other platforms across different countries. Early analyses focused on Twitter in the United States, led by Pablo Barberá, and later expanded to other social media networks. Instagram, for instance, has been explored about the role of celebrities and influencers in electoral campaigns, as seen in the 2021 gubernatorial election in Nuevo León (Díaz Domínguez & García, 2022).

This article proposes studying a different social network, TikTok, which has emerged as the most important platform among young audiences in Mexico, surpassing others. Surveys conducted at the national level in Mexico between April and July 2021 indicated that the proportion of TikTok users averaged 26 percent. By November and December 2022, this proportion had doubled, reaching 53 percent. Half of the Mexican population reports having a TikTok account, and this demographic is predominantly young, with 82 percent aged between 18 and 30 years and only 22 percent aged 50 years and older (Moreno, 2023).

Now, how much does the Mexican audience follow political matters on TikTok? In December 2023, 25 percent reported following political issues to a significant or moderate extent, surpassing Instagram (15 percent) and X (18 percent) but falling short of Facebook (53 percent), WhatsApp, and YouTube (32 percent each). However, half of those under 30 years of age seek political information on TikTok (Moreno, 2024). All of this survey data allows us to infer that this platform is significant for politics and for those involved in politics.

2 Theoretical Approaches

The three key characteristics that set TikTok apart from other platforms are its televisual medium, algorithmic recommendation system, and mobile-only accessibility. Unlike the old Twitter (now X), which primarily features text-based posts, TikTok focuses on video content similar to Instagram. However, Tik-

Tok's videos are shorter than those typically found on YouTube. Additionally, TikTok's algorithm recommends videos based on a wide range of factors rather than likes or the accounts a user follows, which is standard on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Regarding its mobile-only nature, although it is now possible to watch TikTok videos on laptops, the platform is primarily designed for mobile use. This mobile focus provides a low-cost and quick transition from audience to creator for users (Guinaudeau et al., 2022).

TikTok as a political communication tool is making its appearance in some contexts, such as the less than 300 posts by all political parties in Spain between March 2019 and October 2020 (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) or the 128 posts for all Peruvian presidential candidates in the 2021 general elections (Cervi, 2023). In contrast to others, it seems like TikTok is a valid and useful way to make campaigns, such as the 12,500 posts at the local level between 2018 and 2024 in just five states of Mexico (this paper). According to our best knowledge, the bigger extraction of TikTok data only included Morena's candidates who ran in the 2022 state-level elections in six states (Aguascalientes, Durango, Hidalgo, Tamaulipas, Oaxaca, and Quintana Roo), although considering four social platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok (Rivera Magos & González Pureco, 2024).

Other analyses focused on TikTok accounts of the 2024 Mexico presidential candidates, whose volume and interactions were unrelated to the final electoral outcome (Rodríguez Tienda & Flores Maya, 2024). However, we also know that candidates' debates seem to increase traffic and how users interact on the platform in state-level elections, such as the gubernatorial race in Estado de México during the 2023 electoral campaign (Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2024). Finally, they also showcase celebrities and candidates' everyday lives and entertainment activities, as revealed by tracking campaign and campaign videos on TikTok of Mexico's current president (Cerón Hernández et al., 2023).

Definitively, TikTok entails a relevant social platform to interact with users as citizens, such as the use of the "For You Page" as a strategic way to influence the algorithm (Obreja, 2024) or the idea of connecting with young people, in which young politicians seem more inclined to use social media in their communication strategies (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021).

Nevertheless, it also seems like the main goal for political leaders is to appeal to the electorate in a one-way form rather than communicating and, most importantly, interacting with the public. Examples of these one-way styles or top-down communication have been found in different places, such as Zimbabwe (Ureke, 2024), Italy (Zurovac, 2022), Spain (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021), or Peru (Cervi, 2023).

Besides this limited use of the platform, in some cases, political entertainment (containment), which entails persuasion, and playful activism (relativism), in which people consume media content to play with it, can explain how TikTok could play a different role in politics. In this regard, digital celebrities take advantage of playful activism, particularly in contexts in which an important proportion of the young population (Ureke, 2024), (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022). The idea is that political messages through institutional actors are, to some ex-

tent, legitimate to users' eyes, and therefore, delivering messages is possible (Obreja, 2024).

We also know that men receive more neutral and positive comments than women as political leaders on TikTok, which contrasts with the expectations of social identity theory, where feminine political images are perceived more favorably by women (Walker et al., 2023). This could suggest that women are more likely to utilize the platform, but it does not necessarily mean that they will automatically succeed.

Where are we headed? There is a probable gap between candidates with professionalized strategies for using TikTok and those who rarely post videos regularly. Ingenious digital strategies do not always yield positive electoral results, as they may focus more on entertainment than campaign dividends (Orbegozo-Terradillos et al., 2025). Although the literature emphasizes the virtues of transitioning from celebrity to political leader, which is perceived as reasonably logical and even natural (Cervi et al., 2023), engagement tends to dissipate during this transition from influencer to political leader.

3 Hypotheses

From the revised literature, the following hypotheses emerge:

Female candidates are more active than male candidates on TikTok. This hypothesis suggests that female candidates may utilize TikTok more effectively to engage with their audience, potentially due to a greater emphasis on social media strategies or a desire to connect with younger voters who predominantly use this platform.

Influencers often experience a decline in engagement when they shift their focus to political content. This hypothesis suggests that influencers—who typically attract followers through lifestyle or entertainment content—may alienate their audience by addressing political topics. This decline in engagement can be attributed to the polarized nature of political discourse, which may not resonate with their existing followers, or simply to a lack of interest in political issues among their audience.

Demographic factors such as age, education level, and whether an individual is a career politician or an influencer help to understand the volume of activity on TikTok better. This hypothesis suggests that various demographic characteristics influence how actively individuals create and engage with political content on the platform. For example, younger candidates may be more motivated to promote political discussions, while those with higher education levels might engage with the content more critically.

Sentiment analysis conducted before and during the campaign indicates that comments tend to become more neutral over time, suggesting that negative comments are proportionally fewer. This hypothesis assumes that discussions may shift towards a more neutral tone as the campaign progresses. Several factors could contribute to this shift, including increased moderation of comments, users' desire to foster a positive online environment, or the sheer volume of

content that dilutes more extreme sentiments.

4   Data Collection Process

The data collection encompassed all candidacies submitted in 28 capital cities of Mexico, extracting information from the candidates' TikTok accounts. Exceptions were made for the federal entities of Veracruz and Durango, where municipal elections were not held in 2024. In the case of Tlaxcala City, the website of the local electoral institute did not offer an update on registered candidacies at the time of data extraction, and these TikTok accounts were excluded from the dataset. For comparative purposes, the candidates for Mexico City were considered candidates for governing a capital city. However, it is understood that, in practice, this pertains to the governorship of a federal entity.

This comprehensive approach gathered data on 146 candidates across Mexico's state capitals and Mexico City. We located and cataloged each candidate's official TikTok account and two to three campaign-related hashtags for each candidate. Through these hashtags, we captured content officially posted by the candidates and content that referenced or tagged them. Importantly, we archived the entire historical record of each TikTok account's videos, ensuring that both past uploads and those during the campaign period were included.

We extracted a robust set of 173 features for each video, including engagement metrics such as likes, plays, comments, and saves, details about the user who uploaded the video, video, music metadata, and other descriptive elements. Additionally, each comment was analyzed with 61 features that covered the text content, characteristics of the commentator's profile likes received, and further metadata that could be useful for detecting patterns in user behavior. We also preserved the MP4 files of the videos, enabling deeper audiovisual analyses—such as studying production quality, the presence of subtitles, and other visual cues.

To enhance our understanding of public discourse, we collected profile information from the accounts commenting on the candidates' videos. This allowed us to identify repeat commenters, detect potential bot-like behavior, and measure how each candidate's content reached different audience segments. The data collection involved connecting to TikTok's publicly available endpoints using a custom script. We iterated through candidate accounts and hashtags, incrementally gathering new data as campaigns progressed. By periodically revisiting accounts over time, we built a comprehensive history of candidate TikTok activity leading up to the end of the official campaign period.

5   Data Description

A total of 98 candidacies were analyzed from a complete universe of 146. There are however 48 candidates who did not open a TikTok account. As a result we analyze a total of 7,526 videos (posted by the candidate herself, or using

a hashtag associated to that candidate), by 15 political parties and one independent candidate. There are two types of political parties, the seven national ones, namely, the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), the Democratic Revolutionary Party (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD), which lost its federal registration in 2024, the Labor Party (Partido del Trabajo, PT), the Green Ecologist Mexico's Party (Partido Verde Ecologista de México, PVEM), Citizen Movement (Movimiento Ciudadano, MC), and MORENA, and the eight local ones, with state level registration, namely, Popular Awareness (Conciencia Popular, CP) from San Luis Potosí, ESO and Vida from Nuevo León, Sonorense Party (PSon) from Sonora, Safe Querétaro (Querétaro Seguro, QtoSeg) from Querétaro, Republican Mexico (México Republicano, MexRep) from Chihuahua, Solidarity Encounter Party (Partido Encuentro Solidario, PES) from Michoacán and San Luis Potosí, and Time for Mexico (Tiempo por México, TiempxMex) from Michoacán.

TikTok post percentages related to the electoral campaign for state capitals, as depicted in figure 1, which shows that the party with the highest participation on TikTok is the PAN, closely followed by MORENA. Together, PAN and MORENA represent 62.3 percent of all posts. MC comes in third place, and all these three parties combined represent 82.5 percent of all analyzed posts. The PRI however shows a limited presence compared to the top three. Finally other parties show less than 3 percent of participation. This figure highlights the disparity in TikTok participation among political parties during the electoral campaign for state capitals, with PAN, MORENA and MC leading significantly.

Based on daily performance, it is evident that PAN, MORENA, and MC consistently maintained a minimum of 25 posts and around 100 posts during March, increasing their output to nearly 150 posts per day in April. A second group consists of PRI, PVEM, and Vida from Nuevo León (with an influencer named "Pato" Zambrano as Vida's candidate for Monterrey, the state capital), where all three parties posted approximately 10 times daily during March, while PRI began to post 30 or more times in April. The final group includes CP and QtoSeg as local parties and PRD and PT as national parties, which posted one or two times in March and nearly 10 times during the latter half of April and the first week of May.

The data indicates that the most prominent candidacies originated from Mexico City, with three candidates, alongside five from Monterrey, the capital of Nuevo León. Additionally, there were three candidates from Mérida, the capital of Yucatán, and two from Querétaro, the capital of the state of the same name. This suggests that the electoral contest was experienced not only through traditional media and in the streets but also on social networks like TikTok.

The posts by state indicate that Nuevo León and Mexico City lead the list with 16 and 15.7 percent, respectively. We find Yucatán, Michoacán, and Guanajuato in second place, with 8.8, 7.9, and 7.4 percent each. A third group consists of Puebla, Querétaro, Jalisco, Oaxaca, and Chihuahua, which report between 3.3 and 4.9 percent. Finally, other states such as Baja California, Coahuila, and Sinaloa range between 2 and 2.7 percent. The remaining entities
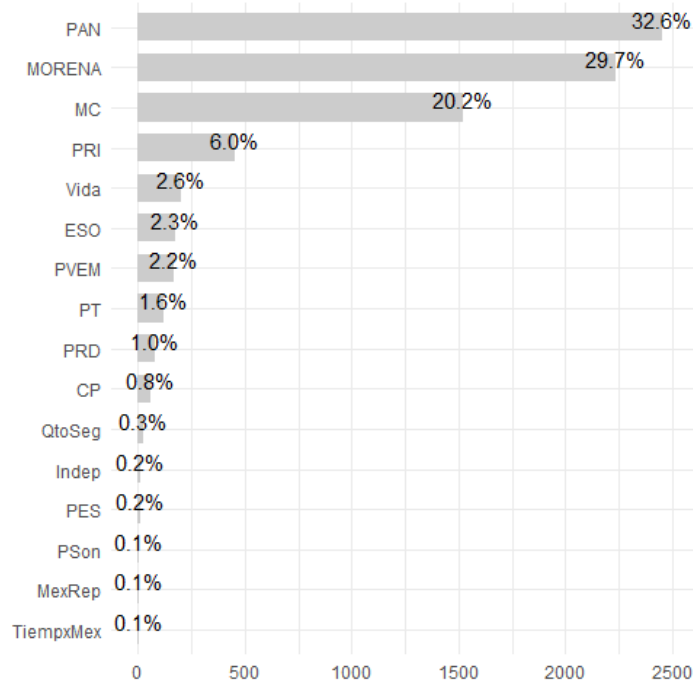
Figure 1: Posts by Party

have less than 2 percent of posts on the social network. It is noteworthy to mention the states with less than 1 percent of uploaded messages, particularly Quintana Roo, Nayarit, Morelos, Tabasco, Colima, Baja California Sur, and Tamaulipas.

Regarding platform activity during the campaign, significant variations were observed across states. In several states, the total number of accumulated posts did not even exceed five per day, whereas in others, it was uncommon to see fewer than ten videos posted daily. Once again, continuous activity was evident in Mexico City and Nuevo León, while, in contrast, activity remained rather limited in states such as Baja California Sur, Morelos and Nayarit. In some other states, activity increased as the campaign progressed, as seen in Yucatán, Tabasco, Querétaro, Campeche, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Colima, and Aguascalientes.

In the corresponding bar chart, it is important to note that each state has its own scale, allowing variations over the weeks to be properly visualized. This explains why Mexico City peaked at over 150 videos per day during debate dates, followed by Nuevo León, where the highest peaks involved more than 25 videos per day.

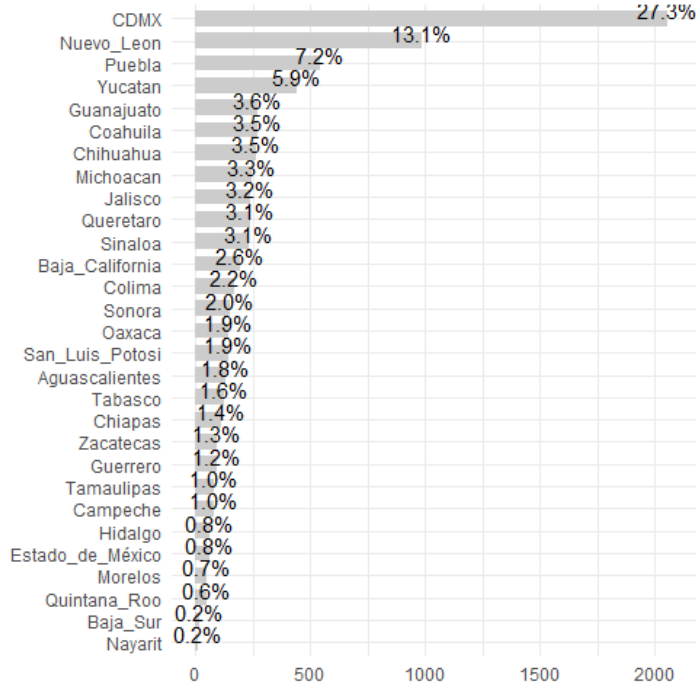States with similar posting volumes included Yucatán, reaching a maximum

Figure 2: TikToks by State

of 35 videos in just one day; Puebla, with peaks of 20 videos per day; and Chihuahua, Oaxaca, and Sinaloa, each recording a maximum of 15 videos per day.

6   Candidate Level Statistics

From the 98 candidacies analyzed, each candidate had an average of 227.66 videos before the official start and 98.26 videos during the campaign. Before the campaign, the average engagement per video was 94.69 saves, 38.96 comments, 2,061.15 likes, 81.91 shares, and 32,680 plays. Meanwhile, during the campaign, the average engagement per video was 76.60 saves, 43.83 comments, 1,467.09 likes, 78.15 shares, and 25,249.30 plays. In particular, comments are the only metric that increased on average during the campaign (38.96 vs. 43.83), suggesting a surge of direct interaction at election time. However, overall engagement dropped from the precampaign period - this is to be expected because we included the entire history of videos for each account before the campaign, and some candidates, especially those with influencer backgrounds, had built substantial engagement well before entering politics. It is also important to
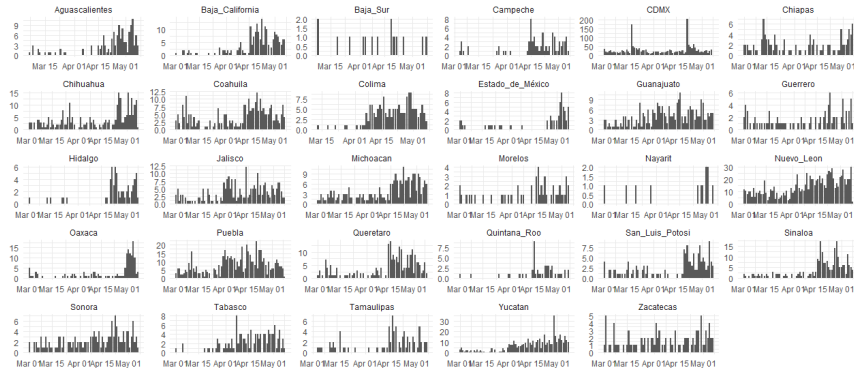
Figure 3: Total TikToks by State

emphasize the high variance in these data. For example, a single video from Mariana Rodriguez (candidate for Monterrey) reached 3 million likes, whereas the most liked video from a Quintana Roo candidate attracted only 341 likes. Such disparities recur across saves, comments, shares, and plays, highlighting the wide range of TikTok usage and audience responses among candidates.

Another way to illustrate the wide variance in video engagement is to compare the number of "not that popular" videos to the number of extremely popular ones. For this analysis, we define a "not that popular" video as one with fewer than 50 plays, fewer than 10 likes, and fewer than 10 comments, and a "super popular" video as one with over 100,000 plays, at least 10,000 likes, and at least 10,000 comments. Overall, there are 252 non-popular videos and just 14 super-popular videos. The 252 low-engagement videos span 50 candidates, meaning that 51% of candidates have at least one video with minimal engagement. On the other hand, only four candidates posted super popular videos, and notably, 71.43% of these top-performing clips belong to Mariana Rodriguez, highlighting her outsized impact on TikTok.

An analysis of the hashtags used in each video description reveals distinct patterns. In municipalities where less content is created—particularly those representing less than 2 percent of all videos (such as Aguascalientes and Nayarit)—candidates tend to rely primarily on their names as hashtags to boost virality. By contrast, in states with higher overall engagement, candidates generally incorporate party hashtags or reference presidential candidates, suggesting a more nuanced grasp of how TikTok algorithms and audiences operate.

We focus on four illustrative cases: Yucatán, Puebla, Nuevo León, and Mexico City. In Yucatán, high engagement largely stems from the campaign of Rommel Pacheco, a former Olympic diving medalist, who uses hashtags that highlight his athletic background. In contrast, his opponents frequently employ hashtags criticizing President López Obrador (AMLO), which also appear effective for driving engagement. In Puebla, the three principal candidates lean

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heavily on their party hashtags for reach; they do not appear to use negative or cross-referencing hashtags directed at rivals.

Nuevo León is a case in point: lesser-known candidates often reference higher-profile rivals to capture some of their follower base, whereas Mariana Rodríguez emphasizes personal branding and trending hashtags. Meanwhile, major-party candidates leverage well-known national party figures, and Patricio Zambrano combines personal branding with rival hashtags and occasional competitor mentions.

Finally, Mexico City—technically a gubernatorial race rather than a mayoral one—presents another distinct approach. Clara Brugada (MORENA) heavily underscores her party affiliation and ties her messaging to the former president's popularity, while the MC candidate and the PAN–PRI–PRD coalition candidate concentrate more on personal branding, seemingly to distance themselves from direct party politics. Notably, cross-candidate hashtags appear minimal in this context. Collectively, these strategies illustrate how diverse hashtag use can be in political campaigns on TikTok, as candidates adopt different methods of engaging voters and shaping their digital presence.

7 Comments Sentiment Analysis and Caracteristics

The 7,526 videos in our dataset collectively garnered 1,834,725 comments, averaging 244 comments per video and approximately 9,656 comments per candidate. Despite these overall means, there is considerable variance across candidates, parties, and individual races. For example, Mariana Rodríguez accrued the highest total (756,567 comments), whereas Amal Lizette Esper Serur received only one comment throughout the campaign. Echoing other engagement metrics, 82% of comments occurred before the official start of the campaign, with the remaining 18% coming during the campaign period.

Among all runs, Monterrey registered the largest share of comments both before (56%) and during (50%) the campaign. Together with Coahuila and Yucatán, these three entities account for more than 75% of all comments, suggesting that influencer candidacies and prior media exposure strongly drive engagement. By party, Movimiento Ciudadano (MC) attracted the most total comments, followed by Morena, mirroring the broader patterns observed at both candidate and municipal levels.

Although the total volume of comments typically declines once the official campaign begins—due to the shorter time frame—an analysis of comments per video reveals two distinct trajectories:

In states with historically high engagement, often thanks to influencer candidates, the average number of comments per video tends to decrease during the campaign. Because these influencers already amassed substantial totals before the campaign, focusing solely on the 90-day campaign window naturally produces lower relative tallies.

Conversely, in states with lower overall engagement and fewer well-known figures, comments per video often increase during the campaign. This implies that even modest or sporadic content can attract attention when candidates lack strong prior exposure.

Comparisons with highly competitive areas such as Mexico City and Monterrey reveal three overarching themes:

- High-Profile or "Influencer" Candidates: Those with prior public or media visibility dominate total comment volume.

- Robust Party Digital Operations: Parties with well-developed social media strategies see higher mean comment counts.

- Local Issues and Personal Narratives: Engagement is influenced by specific factors—such as athletic credentials, activist backgrounds, or ties to key national party figures—that resonate with local voters.

In addition to measuring comment volume, we analyzed the emotional tone behind these interactions using a sentiment analysis. Leveraging the "Robertuito" model—an adaptation of RoBERTa fine-tuned for Spanish-language content—we classified each comment as positive, negative, or neutral. Overall, neutral comments outnumbered both positive and negative ones, though negative comments slightly exceeded positive comments in most states, both before and during the campaign.

Among all candidates, 48 recorded more positive than negative comments, whereas 50 showed the opposite trend. Notably, most candidates with a net-positive ratio exhibited low engagement overall. Only three parties —Movimiento Ciudadano, Redes Sociales Progresistas and PT— achieved more positive than negative comments both before and during the campaign; all other parties and coalitions displayed a net-negative sentiment balance.

Although exact percentages vary by region, the following general tendencies emerge—especially in larger, more competitive states such as Mexico City, Yucatán, and Puebla:

- **Neutral Comments Often Increase**: As campaigning progresses, some voters moderate their tone or focus on factual exchanges, driving up neutral sentiment.

- **Influential Candidates Can Shift Perceptions**: High-profile figures adept at messaging can reduce negative sentiment over time, converting it into neutral or positive engagement.

- **Entrenched Perceptions**: Politicians with long-standing reputations (e.g., major-party incumbents) often maintain stable sentiment distributions, suggesting predetermined public attitudes.

Overall, these findings emphasize how both candidate visibility and strategic communication shape not only the volume but also the emotional tenor of digital discourse during electoral contests.

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