

Cultural Performance, Resource Flows and Passion in Politics: A Situational Analysis of an Election Rally in Western Mexico*

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Abstract. This article contributes to a growing body of literature that questions state-centred approaches to analysing politics, adopting a more de-centred and cultural perspective. It does so by presenting a situational analysis and detailed ethnography of a local election rally in Western Mexico. The analysis of this event as a cultural performance highlights the dramatic enactment of culturally significant acts as a central part of electoral behaviour and shows how everyday organisational life, resource flows, public ritual and passion play a part in politics. That such acts are not merely symbolic is demonstrated by what occurs behind the scenes of political ritual: a local political group appropriates a Water Users' Association and draws on its staff, facilities, resources and wider power relations for its political campaign. Such practices also indicate the unanticipated outcomes of recent administrative decentralisation reforms. New producer organisations created by these reforms to administer former government tasks more efficiently are appropriated politically, not simply in an instrumental, but also in a culturally specific manner.

Keywords: Mexico, cultural performance, resource management, administrative reform, irrigation management transfer, political decentralisation, political culture, *caciquismo*

Introduction

At a local election rally in Nayarit, Mexico, the political candidate and organiser of the event, Alfredo Nuñez, is in the kitchen¹. What brings such a prominent actor at the height of his campaign to this place? A helper is

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¹ The names of persons in this article are fictitious, whenever it is necessary to protect their identity.

servicing a local bean speciality onto plates and hands these to Nuñez and some of his entourage. Atypically, there are no women in the kitchen to do this. Outside, a crowd of Nuñez' supporters have gathered. With careful ceremony, Nuñez personally serves the dishes to several of his prospective voters.

With this dramatic act, Nuñez enacts a regional populist norm, according to which politicians have to demonstrate that they are serving the individual needs of voters in a personalised and culturally appreciated manner. This short vignette aptly illustrates the central argument of this article: the importance of cultural performance in Mexican politics, or in other words, the dramatic enactment of culturally significant acts as a central part of the political and electoral endeavour.

This scene is only a snapshot from the situational analysis of an election rally that follows. This political event is interpreted here as a cultural performance, which is 'the show' that expresses and envisions the cultural, in ways that appeal to the popular imagination.² Besides pointing to the visualised and discursive aspects of political behaviour that is performed 'on stage' or within the public purview, the analysis also focuses on what occurs behind the scenes of political ritual. In this way the article emphasises the role that public ritual and passion play in politics, but also show how this affects everyday organisational life and resource arrangements.

The political event analysed here is the product of neo-liberal reforms implemented across much of Latin America during the last three decades, including political decentralisation, democratic pluralisation, and agricultural deregulation. The Mexican policy of irrigation management transfer (IMT) is typical of this approach as it involves the handover of the management of irrigation districts from the federal bureaucracy to local Water Users' Associations (WUAs). Alfredo Nuñez is the president of such a WUA. A detailed analysis of the activities in which his group is involved indicates the problem of the administrative models that underlie these reforms: these models take resource management to be a technical act of service provision, empty of culture and politics. However, the WUA's resources are mobilised according to culturally appealing and established manners of engaging in politics, in both legitimate and illegitimate ways. In sum, the study of this reform confirms the value of a cultural perspective on politics in the face of political and administrative change.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) advanced radical reforms to existing systems of water management as part of a broader package of neo-liberal reforms. With the support of international funding agencies, the Mexican government led the

² Rolland Munro, 'The Cultural Performance of Control', *Organization Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1999), pp. 619–40.

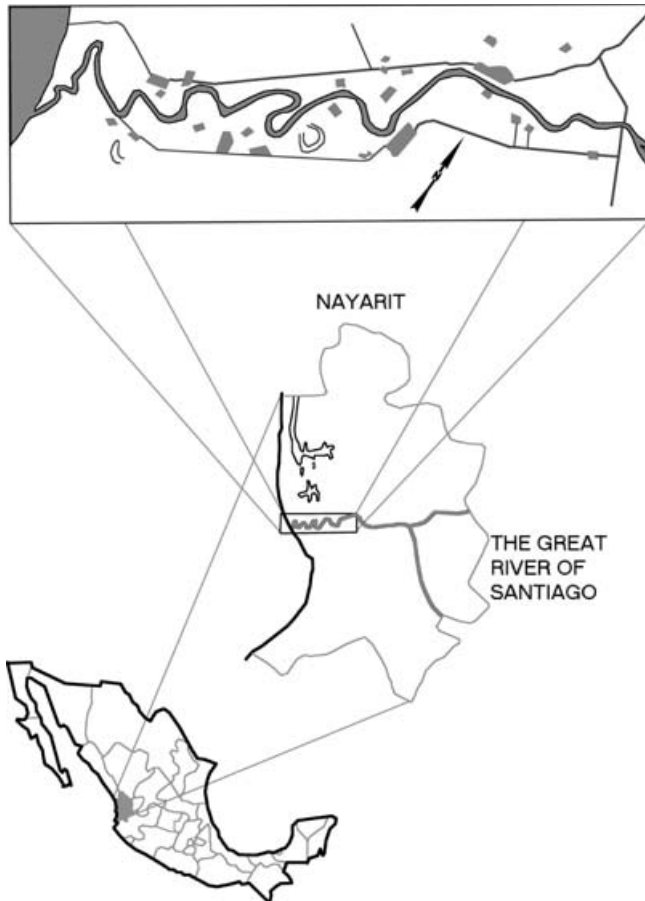


Fig 1. *The Great River of Santiago in Nayarit; the source of water for irrigated tobacco production*

way in introducing new water management reforms. IMT, a new water law, active water pricing and a more liberalised water trade, are just a few examples of the measures approved. In this context, Mexico's IMT programme became internationally recognised as a 'success' and was propagated as a model for other countries seeking to improve irrigation performance and reduce public expenditure.³

In Nayarit, a small state in Western Mexico where the election rally analysed in this article takes place, the transfer of irrigation management is only one of a series of convoluted changes that occurred during the 1990s (see figure 1). As in most other parts of Mexico, the following three changes

³ I have discussed this model at length elsewhere, see: Edwin Rap, 'The Success of a Policy Model: Irrigation Management Transfer in Mexico', *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 42, no. 8 (2006), pp. 1301–24.

rearranged the organisational landscape and created a more competitive political arena: Firstly, the rise of opposition parties and a decline in the hegemony of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI). This scenario weakened the PRI's corporatist organisations, such as the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (National Peasant Confederation, CNC), and the latter's municipal representations (CMCs). Secondly, bureaucratic retrenchment of the Ministry of Agriculture led to the assumption of responsibility for certain policy areas by new bodies, such as the new producers' associations, like the WUAs, in the irrigation districts and *Sanidad Vegetal*, an institution that dealt with plant health. Thirdly, deregulation policies in agriculture affected the political economy of tobacco production, long the principal motor of economic development and the prime source of income, organisation and political control in Nayarit. This induced the dismantling of Tabamex, the government parastatal for tobacco production, the re-entry of multinational tobacco enterprises in the production process and the establishment of the tobacco producers' organisation, *Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo* (Rural Association of Collective Interest, ARIC).

Cultural performance in Mexican politics

Technocratic policy discourse presents administrative reform as politically neutral and devoid of culture. It is argued here, however, that such reforms become incorporated into specific cultural repertoires and that this incorporation alters the flow and distribution of political power and resources in ways that tend to be unforeseen. In Mexico, this is reinforced by an overall movement towards devolution.⁴ IMT is an example of such a development.

These political changes indicate the relevance of recent scholarly work to 'de-centre' analysis of the regime.⁵ A decade ago, Jeffrey Rubin questioned the state-centred perspective on Mexican politics and the tendency to overstate the presence of the corporatist state in provincial Mexico. Analysing locations and flows of power outside the political centre broadens the concept of politics, which was formerly restricted to state and party. Rubin made a case for placing culture, the everyday practices of civil society groupings and the region as a political location, within the discussions about power and the state. Analytical attention therefore shifted to local and regional practices of rule in the context of national projects of state formation, and to the

⁴ Stephen Barracca, 'Devolution and the Deepening of Democracy: Explaining Outcomes of Municipal Reform in Mexico', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 37, no.1 (2005), pp. 1–28.

⁵ Jeffrey W. Rubin, *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism, and Democracy in Juchitán, Mexico* (Durham, 1997).

specific effects these generated for political culture in different regions of Mexico.⁶

Yet in marked contrast to approaches which underline local specificities, neo-liberal reforms appear to introduce a uniform and universal organisational pattern. In the Mexican countryside, these reforms have freed up policy domains that were formerly institutionalised within the purview of the state that are now occupied by 'new' organisational actors. A neo-liberal and technocratic ideology portrays these actors as rational and entrepreneurial agents responding to local technical or market exigencies. However, this overlooks the 'ambitious incumbents' looking to control such policy areas.⁷

Even from a state-centred perspective, the emergence of local actors aiming to control new institutions is unsurprising. The historical literature on local and regional politics in rural Mexico has focused on the central role of the *cacique* (or local political boss). In the period of political centralisation following the 1910–17 Mexican Revolution, the state achieved limited reach at the local level. To incorporate the rural periphery, the political centre required intermediaries. These *caciques* were leaders who were connected to political patrons at higher levels and maintained power by securing resources from above for the communities they represented.⁸ Initially, they were often *agrarista* or military *caciques* who provided land or protection to their rural clientele. Over a period of decades, the spheres of operation within which such leaders operated became bureaucratic agencies and official unions.⁹ As effective brokers, *caciques* fulfilled a structural role in the political order by bridging the gap between different levels of social and political organisation. This kind of intermediation depends on the existence of a state that monopolises and controls the direction of power and resource flows to the periphery.

The question is then what occurs in a neo-liberal era when resources become increasingly subject to competition?¹⁰ Such a transformation allows power to be derived, locally and regionally, through control over institutions and their resources and for it to be legitimated through public ritual. Understanding this process requires a broad understanding of Mexican political culture. The persistence of the *cacique* in Mexican politics cannot be fully appreciated from a structural view of intermediation which neglects the cultural forms, materials and practices that social actors use to articulate

⁶ Robert Aitken, 'Localizing Politics: Cardenismo, the Mexican State and Local Politics in Contemporary Michoacán', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Leiden, 1999.

⁷ Ronald Snyder, 'After Neoliberalism: The Politics of Reregulation in Mexico', *World Politics*, vol. 51, no.2 (1999), pp. 173–204.

⁸ John Gledhill, *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics* (London, 1996).

⁹ Guillermo de la Peña, *Local and Regional Power* (Austin, 1986).

¹⁰ Rogelio Hernández Rodríguez, 'Challenging Caciquismo: An Analysis of the Leadership of Carlos Hank Gonzalez' in Alan Knight and Will Pansters (eds.) *Caciquismo in the Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London, 2005), pp. 249–71.

changing political relations.¹¹ It is through these cultural repertoires that political authority is produced, maintained or expanded. It is also in this process of production that the performative aspect of politics is reinforced or suppressed. The second neglected dimension is the performative, discursive and imaginary aspects of *caciquismo*.¹² Both points are illustrated in a rich ethnography by Pieter De Vries. His work illustrates the pleasure that a cacique displays in corruption, the skill of organising public enjoyment, and the actively fed stories and rumours about his violent character and sexual escapades.¹³ These performative and narrative acts contribute to the construction of the cacique in the popular imagination as a pervasive, corrupt, but inevitable element of Mexican political culture. The cacique skilfully presents himself as an indispensable mediator between the people and the political centre. This responds to a continuous popular search for the ‘right connection’¹⁴ and allows the imagination of the centre as ‘the real source of power’, whilst obscuring the diffuse set of de-centred practices that underlie this.

More broadly, the idea of drama plays a significant role in sociological analysis. The analysis of political behaviour as a form of cultural performance finds inspiration in the Manchester School and its work around the cultural significance of public ritual and social drama.¹⁵ Another source of influence originates in studies of folklore, language use, dance, ritual and theatre.¹⁶ However, my concern here is not ‘with aspects of theatre that creep into everyday life’.¹⁷ More to the point is Erving Goffman’s observation that ‘[w]hen an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part’.¹⁸ In consequence some aspects of a publicly performed

¹¹ Margaret Thompson, ‘The Politics of Cultural Performance’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 99, no. 2 (1997), pp. 416–17.

¹² Wil Pansters, ‘Goodbye to the Caciques? Definition, the State and the Dynamics of Caciquismo in Twentieth-century Mexico’ in Alan Knight and Wil Pansters (eds.) *Caciquismo in the Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London, 2005), pp. 349–76.

¹³ Pieter de Vries, ‘Vanishing Mediators: Enjoyment as a Political Factor in Western Mexico’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2002), pp. 901–27.

¹⁴ Monique Nuijten, *Power, Community and the State: The Political Anthropology of Organisation in Mexico* (London, 2003).

¹⁵ In a classic case, Max Gluckman studied the dramatic roles of Zulus and Europeans in the collective and ritual celebrations around the opening of a bridge in Zululand. From the ‘situational analysis’ of this public occasion, he inferred theoretical insights concerning the social structure and processes of change at work in society. See Max Gluckman, *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* (Manchester, 1958) and Jaap van Velsen, ‘The Extended-case Method and Situational Analysis’, in A. L. Epstein (ed.), *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (London, 1967), pp. 129–49.

¹⁶ D. Parkin, L. Caplan and H. Fisher (eds.), *The Politics of Cultural Performance* (Oxford, 1996).

¹⁷ Erwin Goffman, ‘*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*’ (New York, 1959), p. 254

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

activity are ‘expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed’.¹⁹ These insights can be applied to a broad range of organisational and political settings.

For instance, Rolland Munro has identified certain forms of organisational behaviour as cultural performance.²⁰ He shows how managers construct their cultural performances to make themselves visible to one another, both as members of a group and as individual managers who are identifiably ‘in control’. Since they ‘try to show others what they are doing or have done; actions take on a “performed-for-an-audience” aspect’.²¹ A crude comparison suggests that English managers may be eager to display a sense of control through their work to be considered successful, whereas Latin American populist politicians may want to patronise well-attended public festivities to achieve the same effect. ‘An emphasis on cultural performance focuses on the accomplished ways people make cultural material visible and available’.²² For example, Akhil Gupta demonstrates that even bribe giving is a cultural practice that requires a great degree of performative competence.²³

As a ritual, cultural performance tries to convince participants of the way the world is. Rather than being an empty or opaque show of form, it is meant to engage people, not only rationally, but also emotionally. This is why the festive element is so important, especially in election events around Mexico, and Latin America, more generally. The collective enjoyment of food, drink, music and dance unleashes the flow of passion. For example, De Vries points out that the ‘politics of enjoyment’ in Mexico, and particularly in the state of Jalisco, involves organising parties and recognising the *ejidatarios*.²⁴ Yearning for community. The art of managing people entails that they should become part of a wider design, for example with food and drink, musical groups and mariachis. Such a particular culture of power requires a willingness to engage in personalised relations with *ejidatarios* and the ability to organise public modes of enjoyment.²⁵ Similarly, Ben Fallaw demonstrates that ‘wet politics’ became central to the political culture in the state of Yucatán around the time of the Mexican Revolution. He argues that the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁰ Rolland Munro, ‘The Cultural Performance of Control’.

²¹ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1987), p. 74.

²² Rolland Munro, ‘The Cultural Performance of Control’, p. 619.

²³ Akhil Gupta, ‘Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1995), pp. 375–402.

²⁴ Land reform communities created after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 are called *ejidos*. Before the revision of Article 27 of the Constitution in 1992, ejido land belonged to the nation, with a combination of community (*ejido*) and individual (*ejidatario*) usufruct. Ejido members are called *ejidatarios*. Landowners in the other landowning category in Mexico are called *pequeños propietarios*: private farmers with a limit on land ownership of 100 hectares of land.

²⁵ Pieter de Vries, ‘Vanishing Mediators: Enjoyment as a Political Factor in Western Mexico’.

power of alcohol was key to the ability of Yucatán socialism to mobilise electoral support and draw lower class males to rallies and polling places. The ritual and generous offering of alcohol turned voting into a ‘wet fiesta’.²⁶ Fallaw argues perceptively that this should not come as a surprise, given the cultural and ceremonial significance of alcohol, food and music in popular celebrations and Catholic folk festivals around Latin America.²⁷ These electoral events also reflect a particular Catholic tradition of spectacle that invokes multiple human senses to engage, educate and convert the masses.

Its celebratory character notwithstanding, cultural performance is ‘always enmeshed in a play of power’.²⁸ Particularly around elections the stakes are high, and this fuels the pressure to perform. Electoral candidates experience a great need to demonstrate publicly why they are worth the financial, political and electoral support that they solicit. The timing of cultural performance is essential, because the impact on voting behaviour is limited in duration, since there are so many other factors that play a role. This is not to suggest that cultural performance is all there is to politics. As is shown below, it is intimately connected with a struggle over power and the control of resources. Without the support of material resources and a drive to power, cultural performance lacks potential, meaning and direction.

Hence, the election rally described below was not an isolated event, but concluded a series of private encounters during the preceding months at which the main contender – Alfredo Nuñez – painstakingly constructed a wider coalition of support. His campaign subsequently culminated in three consecutive political rallies at which he publicly assumed leadership of the alliance, as well as mobilised and assessed the support he had acquired. The third and last in this series of public rallies, which was followed by the elections, is described in most detail.

The election was for the *Comité Municipal de Campesinos* (Municipal Peasant Committee, CMC) on the Pacific Coast of Nayarit, Western Mexico. Alfredo Nuñez was president of a WUA in the region and part of a local political group, whose constituency was located on the Left Bank of the River Santiago, part of an electoral district in the municipality of Santiago Ixcuintla (see figure 2). The village, Villa Hidalgo, was the centre of power for this group. Here it controlled a variety of local organisations, most importantly the Left Bank irrigation module. Gonzálo Pérez, a local lawyer and large private landowner became the first president of the WUA and

²⁶ Ben Fallaw, ‘Dry Law, Wet Politics’, *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 37, no. 2, (2002), pp. 37–64.

²⁷ William. H. Beezley, Cheryl E. Martin and William E. French, *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington, 1994).

²⁸ Parkin et al., *The Politics of Cultural Performance*, p. xxxvi.

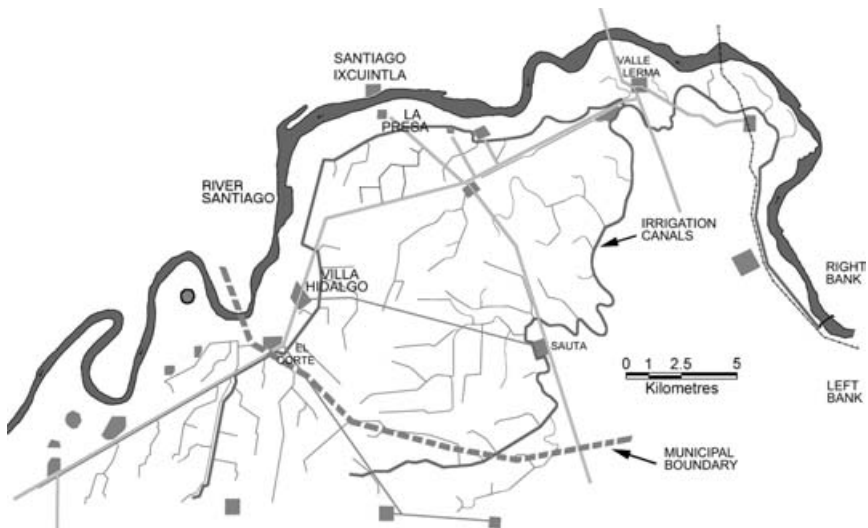


Fig. 2. The Left (& Right) Bank of the River Santiago

established himself as a local cacique. People speculated that the source of wealth that backed his political career and the reason that he always carried a gun was the transport of illicit goods. In 1996, Gonzálo Pérez was elected to the local state congress as a deputy for the PRI. He subsequently bought votes for the WUA elections so that his protégé, local leader and WUA treasurer, Alfredo Nuñez, could become president. Nuñez followed a similar path to that of his patron and soon began to use the WUA as a political platform to promote himself for the presidency of the CMC. This corporatist organisation would form an essential stepping stone for Gonzálo Pérez to become mayor of Santiago. Meanwhile, they had hired an old family friend and *compadre* (ritual co-parent) of Pérez, Fernando Gutierrez, as manager of the WUA and placed various trusted aids and clients as WUA staff. This political group and its organisational base played an important role in the election rally.

The election rally

On a February morning in 1998, an election rally took place in the municipal capital of Santiago Ixcuintla. With a breakfast for his supporters, Alfredo Nuñez rounded off his campaign for the presidency of the peasant organisation, CMC. The CMC integrates the fifty-four *ejidos* (land reform communities) in the municipality of Santiago Ixcuintla. Every three years, these *ejidos* are authorised to send four *ejido* commissioners to elect a new CMC

board.²⁹ Alfredo Nuñez headed a list (*planilla*) of candidate board members that he had compiled of ejido commissioners from around the municipality.³⁰ The list, registered as the green list, was popularly referred to in the local press as *Unidad Campesina* (peasant unity).

At a riverside venue, Alfredo Nuñez was preparing for the day's elections. The place consisted of an enclosed space in the open air with a swimming pool and a long building with a bar and kitchen at the back. Plastic tables and chairs were carefully positioned facing a speaker's platform to await the arrival of more than a hundred ejido delegates. In about an hour, Nuñez' supporters would enjoy breakfast together and listen to his speech here before casting their vote. Nuñez and Mario Uribe were seated behind one of the tables. Uribe was Nuñez' right-hand man in the Solorceño ejido, his official spokesperson, and a board member of the municipal section of *Sanidad Vegetal*, the producers' organisation that protects plant health. He had been involved in co-ordinating Nuñez' campaign for the presidency of the CMC during the previous months. Clear symbols identified the leader, his coalition and supporters. Nuñez, a short man, wore a green shirt, matching the colour of the list that he was heading and the flag attached to a nearby flagpole.

Both men were reading the local newspapers. I greeted them and asked what the articles had to say. Nuñez silently passed me that morning's edition of the local newspaper, *El Diario*. A front-page article announced that elections would be held that same day at the CMC between two opposing groups. According to *El Diario*, Nuñez was supported by 'honest ejido leaders' with a 'democratic vocation', whereas the red list represented the most reactionary and discredited grouping, supported by the tobacco producers' organisation, ARIC. This group was headed by its patron and ex-president, the 'corrupt *El Güero*', and comprised its current president, Gerardo Soto, and their electoral candidate, Humberto Leal. According to the article, they were all men who evoked sad recollections among people from the countryside. Nuñez seemed to be pleased with these favourable reports.

Since its creation at the beginning of the 1990s, ARIC was controlled by the group of its first president, popularly called *El Güero* ('the white one'). *El Güero* owed his political career and this position to Don Emilio, the patriarch of the ruling PRI party in Nayarit. ARIC was established as a state-level organisation for tobacco producers to negotiate the annual tobacco

²⁹ Each of the fifty-four ejidos is allowed to send its president, secretary and treasurer of the ejido committee and the president of the control committee; this implies a total of 216 votes.

³⁰ The ejido assembly elects an executive committee, consisting of the following ejido commissioners: a president or *comisariado ejidal*, a secretary and a treasurer. In addition, the assembly chooses a control committee.

price with the four major multinational tobacco companies operating in the state. It became a financially affluent and politically influential organisation that dominated the tobacco producing areas and rural organisations in Nayarit. At the state level, the financing by ARIC of the political campaigns of several PRI candidates for the state governorship enhanced their political fortunes. In exchange, ARIC acquired several political positions, for example deputies in the State Congress. The CMC in Santiago proved to be central in this respect. Hence, a close connection existed between ARIC and the CMC, manifested by the financial support the latter received from ARIC. This pattern had continued when ARIC put forward Humberto Leal as their new candidate for the presidency of the CMC. As part of their campaign, El Güero's group called upon a selective support base among agrarian leaders in the tobacco producing ejidos that ARIC had built up and financed in the preceding decade. However, their support base had been gradually eroding. For several years, ARIC had been incapable of negotiating substantially higher tobacco prices.³¹ As a result, the organisation was losing credibility among tobacco producers and many called for its removal. This decline in popularity was cleverly exploited by their political opponent.

In the preceding months, Alfonso Nuñez had attracted publicity and popular support by sponsoring a campaign of recrimination against his competitor, Humberto Leal, and ARIC by journalists in the local press. At the same time, these articles projected a favourable image of Nuñez' leadership. This type of local paper was read by many politically informed *ejidatarios* and farmers, and was an important popular source of news and opinions. Yet they were evidently not independent news sources. Local politicians paid the reporters to publicise their version of the news as part of an election campaign. These media cast their public performances in a favourable light and shaped public impressions about the candidates and their opponents. This formed part of the communication of their cultural performance to a wider audience. To finance such a media campaign required a steady source of income; in Nuñez' case this was derived from the WUA.

However, it was not only the WUA's monetary resources that were involved. During the preparations for the rally, Nuñez used organisational staff, resources and other elements to mobilise and attract voters. Around eight o'clock, Leopoldo, the WUA's maintenance assistant, parked the pick-up that he drove for the WUA. In the back he carried several huge pans containing a breakfast dish of meat, tortillas and beans, which he brought into the kitchen. I asked him what time he got up to fetch breakfast. He told

³¹ Tobacco prices remained far below official world market prices. ARIC was subject to agreements between the federal and state government and the companies. Further, they depended economically on the companies, and these were unwilling to pay higher prices.

me that he woke at 4.30 and started to collect ejido delegates and Nuñez supporters from the most remote *ranchos* (rural hamlets) in the municipality. His pick-up was loaded and he estimated that he had transported 50 to 100 people. They would not have come otherwise, he explained, as many had no personal means of transport and their ejidos were not serviced by public transport. The opportunity to do some shopping in Santiago, and then the prospect of having good food and doing some proper drinking on election day, persuaded several of them to come. Whilst I was talking to Leopoldo, other WUA staff members started to arrive. They had collected ejido commissioners from other ejidos around the municipality and transported them in the back of the WUA's pick-ups. Most were men wearing sombreros or baseball caps and ordinary clothes, indicating a modest peasant background. They came in and sat down at the tables. Virtually all were men (few ejido commissioners with voting rights were female). Nevertheless, some women arrived and gradually the place took on a crowded air.

Several well-known ejido leaders and peasant activists from the region arrived under their own steam. Nuñez had clearly succeeded in bringing together a wide coalition of political leaders and activists, producer groups and organisations that had supported him during his campaign. Some of the ejido commissioners present had actively helped Nuñez with his campaign for the CMC and were now registered as part of his candidate board or *planilla*; they expected to gain a position within the CMC once Nuñez won the elections. For example, Bruno Nava, the Pozo de Ibarra ejido commissioner, was later appointed as 'bean marketing' president, to explore new opportunities for selling beans at a higher price, for which he needed to enlist political support and government resources. Others had negotiated personal favours with Nuñez. For example, an activist from Santiago acquired a job for his son as assistant at the WUA. Hence, in order to build an alliance of support and include influential leaders, Nuñez negotiated positions and substantial favours during the preparatory phase of the elections. He was able to do this because of his position as WUA president.

Another of Nuñez' supporters was Nacho Xavier, the then president of *Sanidad Vegetal* and a colleague of Mario Uribe. A week previously at a campaign meeting he had made a speech in support of Nuñez' alliance and used his oratorical skills to paint a negative picture of their adversaries. He fiercely attacked the ARIC-based group and accused them of using ARIC's pick-ups to transport ejido delegates to elections and of using organisational funds to offer bribes in exchange for votes. He claimed that this kind of corruption had to stop and that Nuñez in contrast did not spend a single peso on his own political campaign. (Xavier and Uribe intended to stand for re-election at the end of the year and required Nuñez' support against the candidate

backed by the ARIC-based group.) At that same meeting, another ejido commissioner continued the recriminations against the competing ARIC group and stated that he did not want to have anything to do with people like El Güero, Gerardo Soto, Humberto Leal and their followers. ‘Nuñez confronted them and he was not afraid of them. If only Gerardo Soto (the ARIC leader) had more vision. But that is not the case, so a change is badly needed. That change is provided by Nuñez’ *planilla*’. After this a young man stood up and emphasised the need for unity among the attendees. He said that it was in the interest of the government that peasants would not unite but, rather, remain divided.

From the crowd present, it was evident that Nuñez had been able to ally both groups operating within the PRI and some opposition groups in his effort to capture the CMC. This was remarkable, given the fact that the rally involved a PRI-affiliated organisation. In spite of the coalition being called *Unidad Campesina*, it remained fragile and lacked a shared political identity or a common view on how to tackle the problems of the *ejidatarios* in the region. This intensified the need for public events through which to unify disparate groups and visually demonstrate their support. For example, Domingo Xavier, an ejido commissioner and ex-deputy for the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) had deployed his skills as orator in favour of Nuñez at an earlier campaign event organised two weeks previously and his spirited speech drew an enthusiastic response from the audience. In addition to its discursive dimensions, cultural performance also has a strong visual aspect. Xavier claimed to have suggested Bruno Nava as secretary of the *planilla* and said that he had a lot of confidence in him, which he emphasised by firmly shaking his hand afterwards. The visible and physical act of shaking hands further expressed the support for the candidate’s alliance.

Several of Nuñez’ campaign organisers walked around nervously, counting the ejido commissioners present and allowed to vote. They were checking a list drawn up on the basis of the two earlier public events. The campaign event two weeks previously in the auditorium of the CMC had enjoyed quite a good turnout of delegates. To attract the commissioners, Nuñez and his collaborators promoted the meeting by spreading the word that they would serve beer and *birria*, a popular goat’s meat dish often eaten in rural areas of Western Mexico at festive occasions and political events. At the beginning of the event, some of the few women in the crowd of sombreros and baseball caps were asked to serve the *birria* on plastic plates. Nuñez and Uribe were actively distributing the plates from the front stage to the back of the auditorium among the seated delegates who patiently awaited their food. Nuñez asked the women to serve small portions, because he was concerned about whether there would be enough to go round. When Uribe opened the meeting, he mentioned the lack of food and added that hopefully people felt satisfied. The quantity of food clearly contributed to the quality of the event.

With their stomachs filled, beer also began to flow to the members of the audience. Uribe continued with the introduction of the two other members of Nuñez' *planilla*. The candidates were enthusiastically applauded and greeted with cheers. The distribution of food and drinks appeared to energise the audience.

Meanwhile, Nuñez and Uribe took their seats behind an elongated podium as part of the presidium positioned on the stage in front of the auditorium. They were surrounded by large signs for the PRI and CNC. All these elements worked to support the candidate and to make his performance authoritative. In the presidium, Nuñez was accompanied by a locally well-known agricultural engineer who worked for the federal government and another official representing government authority and agronomic expertise. Uribe welcomed them. He indicated the tall *güero* (white man) seated in the first row and introduced me as an engineer from Holland, 'here on a technology exchange.' Uribe praised the fact that people like 'engineer Eduardo came all this way to co-operate with us on the Left Bank, thanks to our president of the Left Bank'. I stood up and uncomfortably greeted the people in the auditorium who were applauding. Details about a supposed technology exchange were in effect made up by the speaker in order to exploit politically my presence.

Subsequently, the audience listened to a series of speeches, starting with Nuñez and followed by a number of supporting ejido leaders. They responded approvingly with shouts of encouragement, loud exclamations, clapping and jokes. Although the floor was opened for other comments from the audience, most commissioners chose not to speak in public. A select group of leaders reinforced the candidate's performance, not just with words or mere physical acts, but also by displaying their status, class, experience and means. The interventions were made by the politically more experienced and eloquent participants. These were usually better educated and, judging by their clothes and conduct, not without economic means.

At that meeting, Nuñez counted around 142 voting supporters, more than the 109 votes required, and concluded that this would be enough to win. Nevertheless, he urged the ejido commissioners to convince their colleagues to come to the elections, because they still needed more support for a secure victory. After the event, Nuñez' campaign organisers were optimistic but indicated their insecurity, as the turnout and loyalties of delegates remained unpredictable until the very end. These rallies were not necessarily a reliable indicator of voting on the day of the poll. Delegates could easily change sides during the weeks before the election, because of a similarly pleasant event, or promises and payoffs that the opposing group could offer in the meantime. At the event that was held afterwards, only around 80 people turned up. The organisers became slightly concerned about the difficulties of again

mobilising all of these voters next time. In response, Nuñez pleaded that people's interest and commitment should not diminish and all present should urge their friends and acquaintances to come and vote the following week. These electoral events were thus essential for the business of attracting and monitoring votes. The quality of cultural performances was being assessed with reference to the atmosphere created amongst the voters present.

At the subsequent rally the organisers counted around 107 votes, which would normally be sufficient to win them the elections. However, they noted the absence of several people who had committed themselves to come to the breakfast and worried about their votes. Nuñez deliberated with his collaborators about what to do and decided to send Leopoldo with his pick-up to collect a certain commissioner who had not arrived yet. Despite all the monetary, gastronomic and transport resources deployed to attract voters, this could not guarantee an electoral victory.

Interpretation is an essential part of cultural performance. In this respect, the perspective of an outsider is revealing. Outside on the pavement, I started a conversation with the principal of a local agricultural college in Villa Hidalgo. He had come to express his support for Nuñez, in spite of the fact that he could not vote. Like everybody else involved in the campaign, he had been mobilised to bring some of Nuñez' supporters from ejidos around the municipality to Santiago. He had only recently migrated to Nayarit from the northern state of Sonora yet although a newcomer, had developed a keen interest in political relations in the region. He informed me that Nuñez' alliance was fighting against a small group here 'on the Right Bank' which had always dominated politically and distributed posts in the CMC, the municipality and in the tobacco producers' organisation, ARIC. He told me that people from the Left Bank of the river had exercised little influence on politics within the municipality. As a newcomer to the region, he thought it remarkable that a river brought about so much discord. However, because Nuñez was supported by most ejidos on the Left Bank and also acquired support in several ejidos on the Right Bank, he could be expected to win the elections. The principal highlighted one aspect of the cultural performance, namely how the political group employed the river symbolically to create divergence with its adversaries.

Whilst we discussed regional politics, Gonzálo Pérez arrived in his white pick-up. He started to greet people around us, particularly the ejido commissioners that he knew from the Left Bank. He shook their hands forcefully, as if he had come to remind them of a commitment. The principal whispered with awe that this man is a *diputado* (deputy) and that he belongs to Nuñez' group, adding that he was also a large private producer. Pérez came over to us and firmly shook our hands. The principal conferred with Pérez about the fact that he was supposed to bring the secretary of the Villa Hidalgo ejido

with him, but had been unable to find him. He gave the impression of rendering an account to somebody who was behind the organisation of the campaign. Pérez responded that he would go to Villa Hidalgo himself to search for the man in question and bring him here. Pérez officially represented the private producers of the Left Bank; therefore Nuñez could not afford to be too identified with him, because they represented contradictory interest groups. Nuñez refrained from publicly referring to his relations with influential PRI politicians, such as Pérez, Felix Torres or the governor. In the local newspapers, he explicitly denied such relations and emphasised his prime loyalty to the peasant sector, as opposed to the private landholders. Later, the principal asked me if I had noticed Pérez' muddy boots. He thought this was deliberate, implying that Pérez wanted to show he was an ordinary farmer, just like the other *ejidatarios*, and not an elitist private producer. By playing a background role in this electoral performance, Pérez avoided the impression that he was directly involved in the campaign. Nevertheless, his presence and shaking of hands seemed to remind several people of an electoral commitment. He also aimed to present a particular image of himself in view of his own electoral ambitions. These visible acts and the image that they produce are part of a cultural performance.

However, at the rally the spotlight was on Nuñez. When the principal and I decided to go inside, most of the tables were already occupied by ejido commissioners and their entourages. The first dishes of pork and *frijoles charros* (cowboy-style beans) with tortillas were being distributed on plastic plates among the waiting crowd by WUA personnel and some of the organisers of the campaign. Nuñez himself was also fully engaged in bringing around the plates of food to his potential voters. He personally inquired of several people what they wanted to eat and drink. With careful ceremony, he collected their food from the kitchen and rapidly and humbly satisfied their wishes by personally bringing it to them. We proceeded towards the kitchen and the principal remarked, '*you see, here are the chiefs*', pointing at Fernando Gutierrez, Mario Uribe, and Laguna, a water guard from the WUA, among others, who were serving the food from the pans onto the plates and handing them to those running in and out of the kitchen. I asked the principal why Nuñez busied himself so much with serving food to everybody and he explained that Nuñez shows himself as people like to see him. By bringing around food and drink he demonstrates that he is an open person and personally approachable by everybody. I added my impression that Nuñez wanted to show that he is their *servidor* (servant), a word that he had used before, and the principal nodded enthusiastically to confirm my impression. This was a climax in Nuñez' performance. Through this dramatic act of personally distributing food and drinks, he attempted to please his voters and win their votes.

Subsequently, he also demonstrated his powers of oratory. After most delegates had finished their breakfast and appeared satisfied, Nuñez walked up to the speakers' platform and began a fiery speech in which he addressed them as *compañeros* (comrades) and once as *hermanos de clase* (class brothers). He promised that when he attained the presidency of the CMC he would not betray their trust and would truly represent their interests, particularly those of the bean and tobacco producers, unlike the present CMC and the ARIC who clearly had been neglecting *campesino* interests. Nuñez intended to fight for a fair price for beans and tobacco and all other crops. '*Vamos a luchar por todos ...*' (we are going to fight for everybody). He promised *progreso y bienestar* (progress and prosperity) for all *campesinos*. Then he affirmed it was necessary to speak strongly to the governor in order to make him aware of what they needed. Nuñez also promised to work on bringing in new companies from outside that would generate employment on government projects and infrastructure works, such as the new bridge and the expansion of the Right Bank irrigation module. He alleged this would make agriculture flourish again, as in the days of *La Costa de Oro* (the Gold Coast), a popular reference to the rich backdrop of collectively remembered images of the golden years of tobacco cultivation and great rural prosperity on the Northern Coast of Nayarit before the 1980s. With rhetorical skill, the leader linked himself to the past, present and future of the region.

This cultural performance elicited a response from the audience. Nuñez dramatically exclaimed that it was 'now or never ...' and that 'it [was] time for change'. He claimed that he would convince them with actions and not with words. Since he was totally committed himself, he claimed, he only wanted to ask the same of his audience: he needed everybody's support. In response to his powerful voice, expressive gestures and use of revolutionary language, the audience became increasingly animated. They applauded and from time to time shouted in order to express their approval. At the end of his speech, Nuñez made a plea for *unidad* (unity). On winning the elections, he affirmed, he would offer his opponent the job of secretary of the CMC in order to prevent unnecessary discord, something he claimed they had agreed with each other. Nevertheless, he did not doubt that victory would be theirs. To round off the speech somebody shouted '*arriba la planilla verde*', in support of the green candidate list. In response, the audience cheered and applauded enthusiastically. Nuñez' performance liberated a passion among the audience for his political cause.

The oratorical part of the performance reinforced a positive emotional response generated through the enjoyment of food and drinks just prior to going to the polls. When Nuñez' speech finished, the crowd automatically flowed out onto the pavement into a procession, with the green flag taken down from its pole and held triumphantly aloft. Nuñez assumed the lead

with his *planilla* behind him and his crowd of supporters following. They passed the main plaza of Santiago, which is the administrative and political centre of town, on their way towards the CMC building. It is only a short walk of a few minutes and the procession arrived far too early for the election, leaving supporters to wait in the shade across the road opposite the entrance. The supporters of the red *planilla* arrived in smaller, disparate groups. The green procession under its banner unified the diverse currents in the alliance and physically displayed hierarchy and popular support.

At around eleven o'clock the delegations of voting ejido commissioners were allowed into the large auditorium where they were able to register to vote. The door of the building closed behind them. Nobody else was left in the building, except for the mayor, representatives from the PRI and the national CNC. Whilst waiting in the shade for the result, the green supporters emitted occasional cheers in favour of their *planilla*, displaying optimism about their prospects of winning; the reds remained quietly in the background. Fernando Gutierrez functioned as Nuñez' nerve centre outside, co-ordinating the information flows amongst the supporters and buying water for those that were getting thirsty. After more than an hour of waiting, a wave of cheers came from the CMC building, announcing the imminent result: Nuñez, with 101 votes, had won the election by a small majority. The green supporters were evidently happy, yet anxiety was expressed about the unexpectedly narrow victory. The green crowd outside flowed inside the building, whilst most of the reds stayed out. Nuñez mounted the stage and gave a speech of thanks to his supporters. Following him, the mayor of Santiago and then a representative of the PRI made speeches stressing the need for *unidad* and co-operation to the benefit and progress of the peasantry. This closing of the official election echoed Nuñez' earlier calls for peasant unity after a period of electoral discord.

After the speeches, the triumphant supporters moved to the Santiago fairground. This is located on the periphery of the town, designated to host its annual festivities. A series of long tables had been placed in the open air to celebrate the victory with a large banquet for the ejido delegates and to thank them for supporting Nuñez and his green candidates. I arrived when the party was in full swing. The large crowd of people there indicated that those who fancied a free meal of *birria* with beer had somewhat freely interpreted the notion of supporter. Goat bones stripped of their meat, plastic plates on the ground and collections of empty bottles on the tables reflected the euphoria felt among Nuñez' supporters. The cheerful song of a spirited ejido commissioner over a speaker system reinforced this impression, much to the entertainment of his colleagues around the tables. WUA staff members were distributing beers and also consuming one or two themselves. In the wings of this spectacle, a small group of collaborators around Nuñez was

discussing the close victory and speculating about those votes that were unexpectedly not cast in his favour. The celebrations continued for hours until all the crates of beer were finished and everybody returned home. This lavish banquet that ended Nuñez' cultural performance served to entertain, satisfy and thank his voters and supporters.

Adverse impacts of reform: the political use of resource arrangements

This rally was more than simply a transactional, interactive or coercive setting. It was also a performative setting that functions implicitly through its choreography, sequence of events and intrinsic qualities, by generating an affective bond among a larger public and its representative.³² Alcohol, food and music have a significant contribution to make in terms of producing such altered states of consciousness.³³ The performative use of these cultural materials shows that material resources are not managed in a culturally neutral way.

Yet, it is a post-modernist flaw to consider just the symbolic or foregrounded aspects of culture. It is precisely what occurred behind the scenes of this cultural performance that allows for a reflection on the administrative reforms that gave rise to these events. During Nuñez' campaign, his political group appropriated resource arrangements – a variety of staff, capital, technologies and resource flows – to which the WUA provided access. The political appropriation of these arrangements adversely affected the WUA's resource base in several domains that were crucial to its service provision. This directly contradicts the neo-institutional expectations on which the IMT policy was built. The central idea behind the devolution of irrigation management and the creation of WUAs was the structuring of incentives to ensure optimal output. The water users' main incentive was to secure an efficient and effective delivery of services and resources. However, the output of the WUA was sub-optimal. Since these administrative models regard resource management as a technical act of service provision, the cultural use of the WUA's resource arrangements for political ends was unexpected.

President Nuñez himself was neither a real water user nor an ordinary peasant, but he opted to represent them politically.³⁴ Although the water users and water management issues hardly figured in his election campaign, the WUA became his major source of income and campaign funds. Officially, he did not even receive a wage as president, but the presidency of the WUA

³² See also Larissa Adler Lomnitz, Rodrigo Salazar Elena, Ilya Adler, *Simbolismo y Ritual en la Política Mexicana* (Mexico, 2005).

³³ Deborah F. Bryceson, *Alcohol in Africa: Mixing Business, Politics and Pleasure* (Portsmouth, 2002).

³⁴ Although initially he owned a plot of a few hectares in the Solorceño ejido, he did not cultivate it himself, but rented it out and later even sold it.

afforded him the opportunity to increase his local standing and develop a profile as a political leader. Furthermore, the WUA's office building was useful for receiving guests and doing business in a confidential atmosphere. Nuñez had a special desk for this purpose. Behind it, he co-ordinated his campaign for the CMC. When he received politically important people, he displayed the great responsibility that managing Nayarit's largest irrigation system entailed. He would give orders to the staff, make urgent calls, make decisions about large sums of money, and hence demonstrate the influential position that he enjoyed as president. From this position he mobilised different resources:

Water distribution

Water was undoubtedly a political resource. Nuñez' political group granted privileged access to irrigation water to several large, favoured producers, through the staff members that operated the canal infrastructure on the Left Bank. This was done in exchange for informal fee payment agreements³⁵ that freed up unreported revenue flows that were invested directly in the campaign. Because of the relative abundance of water, the effects of this practice were not extremely serious for other producers and ejidos. Even so, the use of water as a political resource was restricted. Most importantly, the canal networks of the Left Bank and Right Bank are independent of each other. Therefore, Nuñez' group could not use water distribution to build support on the Right Bank. The fact that these conditions deviated from those experienced in most other Mexican irrigation districts, where water is scarce, indicates why in this case the use of maintenance machinery as a political tool was so crucial to Nuñez' campaign.

Maintenance machinery and public works

A politically and commercially more interesting asset was the WUA's maintenance machinery. Especially in this tropical rural setting, with high rainfall that causes frequent floods and rapid vegetation growth, such machinery is in high demand. The WUA controlled a stock of mobile machinery, such as a dragline, a hydraulic excavator and several trucks for which they employed a group of trusted maintenance operators. The political group freely moved the machines and the machine operators around in line with its most immediate financial and political interests.

Firstly, the machines constituted an important resource to generate political support and expand the range of Nuñez' political alliance to the Right

³⁵ The rationale behind providing privileged access was never just financial, but was enmeshed with relations of friendship, commerce and political support.

Bank of the municipality. The WUA provided favours in the form of public works to several ejido commissioners outside the Left Bank irrigation district who played an important role in acquiring support for Nuñez' alliance. These public works, such as public roads, a village square or a football field, are appreciated sources of legitimation and political support for rural leaders who seek to improve their public image in their constituency. Secondly, the group also used the maintenance machinery as a source of illegitimate revenue to finance its political campaigns. Nuñez' campaign expenses were partially covered by privately renting out the machinery to third parties who paid an hourly rental fee, whereas these revenues should have accrued to the WUA.

The unfortunate impact of the political and intensive use of the machinery was that the Left Bank infrastructure received insufficient maintenance, the condition of the machines deteriorated and substantial repair costs were incurred, as a consequence of which the trucks and machines were often left unused for long periods.

Motorised political mobility

Transport was essential for both political mobility and electoral mobilisation. The WUA had at its disposal a fleet of motorbikes and vehicles operated by its staff and lubricated with gasoline and financial flows. Political mobility and popular mobilisation were formerly largely restricted to government or party officials and wealthy producers. On election day, this mobile fleet enabled the transportation of a large number of potential voters from the most remote ejidos to the election event in Santiago.³⁶ Hence, the WUA's facilities to transport voters to the ballot box proved to be essential in winning the CMC elections. Before and after the elections, the president of the WUA, Nuñez, was mobile because of his full-time access to a WUA pick-up truck. As a result, he was always able to travel quickly from his base on the Left Bank to the other part of his constituency, the Right Bank. This was absolutely essential for his electoral work around the municipality. His campaign organisers, who included several WUA staff members, were also able to move around the municipality without losing too much time. In this manner, they were able to organise a series of festive encounters with potential supporters and build an alliance for the upcoming elections. Furthermore, they were able to reach the state capital, Tepic – critical for lobbying the state government.

³⁶ This practice is very similar to the way in which government cars, personnel and resources used to be and still are mobilised for PRI events. The difference is that, in this case, the transport is mobilised and financed from non-government resources diverted from a WUA.

Administration and financial revenues

The appropriation of the WUA's resources for electoral purposes clearly had an adverse affect on the organisation's financial status. During the CMC campaign, the WUA's revenues from irrigation fee payments for the main irrigation cycle quickly dried up, much earlier than in other years. As early as halfway through the main irrigation cycle in March 1998, just after the elections, the WUA experienced severe cash flow problems, with the result that the payment of salaries and bills was postponed for several months. As a consequence, the WUA had to request a loan from the bank, with its properties as collateral, which it could only finish repaying during the next main irrigation cycle (1998/1999). After becoming president of the CMC, Nuñez increased his political radius of action, in spite of the fact that the CMC itself turned out to have few revenue sources. The political groups in control of ARIC and the municipality, who saw themselves defeated in this electoral battle and feared Pérez' candidacy for the mayoralty, stopped their financial support to the CMC. As a result, during Nuñez' last year in office (1999), the WUA's final balance was negative for the first time in several years. All these factors led to growing discontent and more open criticism of the political management and corruption in the WUA among its delegates and staff, and with the *Comisión Nacional del Agua* (National Water Commission, CNA) and the state government.

Political, administrative and economic changes in the countryside

Although this pattern of resource allocation reveals continuities with former public irrigation management, it differs in that it occurred in a context of major political, administrative and economic changes. Nuñez' electoral performance was therefore not a mechanical reproduction, but rather an accommodation of a cultural repertoire to a new situation in which resource management and political behaviour were less centrally controlled – a situation that reinforced both the requirement and opportunity for cultural performance. Political changes that induced this included the decline of the PRI's hegemony and the weakening of its corporatist organisations. In many Mexican regions, an electoral victory for the PRI was less secure than ever, particularly on the Northern Coast of Nayarit, which had a history of voting for the left-wing opposition.³⁷ In an increasingly competitive political arena, neo-liberal policies further changed the political economy of tobacco

³⁷ Two elections stand out in this respect. In 1975, Alejandro Gascon, who had a strong support base on the Northern Coast, won the Nayarit governorship elections for the Popular Socialist Party, PPS. This victory was not conceded by the PRI. Later, in 1993, the left wing party PRD effectively mobilised popular discontent on the Northern Coast about

production, rural organisation, and regional politics and led to the emergence of 'new' organisational actors with overlapping electoral constituencies.

However, these larger political, administrative and economic processes did not develop as evenly as anticipated and resulted in significant regional variety. On the Northern Coast of Nayarit, the political groups that appropriated the new producer associations that emerged were not really 'new' actors. Their history, networks and patrons lay within the PRI. Just as Tabamex and other bureaucratic agencies had played a central role in the political life of Nayarit during the 1970s and 1980s, these producer associations gained in political importance during the 1990s, particularly in rural municipalities such as Santiago. They did this by launching candidates for electoral positions and giving political, organisational and financial support to the campaigns of allied politicians in the PRI.

Despite general corporatist decline and democratic pluralisation, the Santiago CMC remained politically important. Therefore it received financial support from the affluent ARIC and political support from the PRI mayor. This permitted it to continue representing the ejidos in their relations with the political and bureaucratic bodies of the state. As a privileged space for negotiation, the CMC also remained strategic for gaining access to positions in the municipality and for political ascendancy more generally. For the previous couple of years, this opportunity had been controlled by the ARIC-based group, but now this was challenged by a WUA-based group from the Left Bank of the River Santiago. As the CMC elections occurred in the run-up to an important election year, they were decisive for the future of both competing political groups.

Furthermore, electoral reform cannot undo existing forms of political association. Although the case presented above may give the impression that local elections took place without higher level political involvement, this is not the case. Through his family, Pérez had political connections to the group of the influential ex-governor, Don Emilio González. As part of a larger scheme, the political group supported the candidacy of one of his protégés, Felix Torres, the mayor of Tepic, who registered as one of the six PRI candidates for governor of Nayarit.

The election rally as a cultural performance

In a general sense, the election event unmistakably reflects the populist and personalist political culture of Mexico and bears clear traces of the corporatist and clientelist relations that have dominated (PRI) politics since the

the privatisation of Tabamex and agricultural decline in general. The PRI only recognised their victory on the Left Bank of the River Santiago.

Mexican Revolution. At a more specific level, Nuñez' political group displays a meaningful and persuasive performance in a specific cultural repertoire in order to appeal to, engage and mobilise support among a target group of ejido commissioners. My analysis focuses on six elements that are characteristic of the cultural performance that was described.

Firstly, the event exposes an ambiguity concerning the role of policy in contemporary rural politics. This is not to say that policies are unimportant. The policy messages on which Nuñez focused his campaign centred on the deplorable state of agriculture in the region, the low prices for crops, the poor marketing opportunities and the inability of the government to solve these problems. As an electoral strategy, he took a strong anti-ARIC position. In this manner, he mobilised general discontent among tobacco farmers and other producer segments in the ejidos of the municipality. These issues of low crop prices and the malfunctioning of ARIC were general concerns among many peasants and small tobacco producers, and a basis around which Nuñez' built his support alliance. Yet, there is also a performative aspect to challenging these issues of general discontent. In fact, from this local level little can be done to change the political economy of tobacco production, given international market relations and the 'iron triangle' between multinational tobacco enterprises, the Mexican government and ARIC. However, the issues that Nuñez addressed on behalf of his constituency are clearly not the only basis on which to build a political alliance and gain popular support. This is borne out by the rest of the analysis.

Secondly, Nuñez maintains a rather conventional statist discourse that emphasises the need for state support for the peasantry. The only new element is perhaps his call to attract more companies from outside the region to create employment. This is understandable, because it is the *raison d'être* of the corporatist organ he wishes to represent. Nuñez' demands for a return to populist redistributive policies, such as federal price support for the bean producers, and his attention to the construction of large infrastructural works in the municipality appear outdated in times of state disengagement, but are to be understood in the context of the approaching governorship elections. During this period, the PRI did its best to regain electoral support along the established lines of targeted support and subsidised goods to the popular classes, and infrastructure works of large symbolic importance to regional development. This created some room for negotiation, interest representation and performative display for local PRI representatives, such as Pérez and Nuñez.

Thirdly, despite the focus on the leader's accomplishments, he is dependent upon a political group and a larger alliance. By playing a central role during the campaign events, Nuñez manifests his political leadership over the alliance that he and his collaborators have united. The campaign meetings

serve as special occasions to commemorate the leader's good deeds, values and strong points. Nuñez' performance stresses personal leadership and that hides the fact that he is part of a political group and alliance of support that organises his election rally. During the entire campaign, his political group displays a mutual task division and cultural credentials in organising campaign events and mobilising voters. It is the result of a performative competence and a distribution of labour among a larger collective. For example, the field staff of the WUA provide the organisational footwork for Pérez and Nuñez. Further, at the managerial level, Guttierrez and Pérez were actively involved in the co-ordination of the campaign. Although Pérez consciously kept himself in the background, he is Nuñez' patron, and he financed and educated him in his political career.

Fourthly, there is an interesting contrast embodied in the type of leadership that Nuñez' public performance displays – a contrast that accentuates servitude and humility on the one hand and authority on the other. Nuñez is presented by himself and others as an honest leader from a low peasant background who represents a wider imagined constituency of peasants and ejidatarios. Yet, this humble approach to representing his electoral base co-exists with the contrasting image of an authoritative leader. The change that Nuñez promises to bring about, the confidence he displays about winning the elections, his firm stance towards the governor and his opponents, his charismatic and expressive body language, not to mention his eloquence, all contribute to the same impression. In addition, several members of the alliance reinforce Nuñez' *machismo* by publicly glorifying him in sexually charged language as a potent and courageous leader who is not afraid to challenge his opponents, of whose masculinity they make fun. Humility and authority are clearly two sides of the same coin; both appeal to people's ideals about the character of a leader and, as a result, people are able to identify with Nuñez' candidacy.

The leader skilfully connects himself with popular sources of political authority and public appeal. Nuñez situates himself as a vital link in the transition from the rural past to the future. His revolutionary language and the symbols that surround him revive popular recollections of a prosperous regional past and call to mind a revolutionary peasantry historically united in the national struggle for land and liberty. Although these images may have fallen into disuse in other parts of the PRI, here Nuñez appeals to the leftist factions that are part of his alliance. Further, to generate hope for a better future, Nuñez refers to new government programmes, large infrastructure works and companies from outside. Others associate him with government authority, agronomic expertise and foreign advanced technology. Nuñez' symbolic act as leader of the alliance reaches its zenith when he walks at the front of the procession towards the polls, with his collaborators and

supporters behind him. This ritual represents the hierarchical order and unity in his alliance.

Fifthly, to gain credibility as a political leader, Nuñez shifts between dismissing his opponents and reconciling himself with them. In the run-up to the election, Nuñez launches a campaign of denunciations to blacken the name of the opposing ARIC group. The severe moral attacks on the corruption of their opponents reveal an ironic aspect of the performance. The president of *Sanidad Vegetal* fiercely criticises their adversaries for using organisational resources in support of their campaign, ignoring the fact that he and Nuñez were doing exactly the same. However, characteristically for PRI politicians secure of victory, towards the end of the campaign they switch to pleading for unity and consensus and to reconciling differences with their opponents. Further, a signal that Nuñez sends out to the governorship and the party is that he is a leader with a significant support base that the PRI cannot afford to lose. Defecting to the opposition is no longer as inconceivable as it was before.³⁸

Finally, by personally bringing food and drink to his potential voters, Nuñez projected a cultural performance and image of a leader committed to patronise and cater for the individual needs of his supporters, by personally redistributing the resources that he controls because of his position. In addition, this emphasises the fact that it is Nuñez in person who provided them with these pleasures and to whom they should be thankful. Through this act, Nuñez reminded several individual ejido commissioners of their mutual complicities developed at earlier festive encounters, for example through the promise of a favour or a job. The provision, collective consumption and enjoyment of food and alcohol imply a certain reciprocity³⁹ and nurtures relations of trust and *cuatismo* (male friendship). Yet, at the same time, the public distribution of food and drink enacted the private appropriation and personalised redistribution of resources on which the alliance was partly based. This reveals how cultural performance as a ritual can be tied to corruption in a way that is similar to, but distinct from, that illustrated by Gupta's work in India.⁴⁰ For the wider audience, however, this act positioned Nuñez as the legitimate leader deserving of popular support. After his election and inauguration, Nuñez rewarded his supporters in style and celebrated his success by means of a large festive banquet with alcohol, food and live music.

³⁸ J. L. Klesner, 'Political Change in Mexico: Institutions and Identity', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1997), pp. 184–200.

³⁹ This is expressed in the saying 'There is no such thing as a free lunch'. Nobel laureate Milton Friedman took this phrase to summarise the nature of all (economic) transactions. See Milton Friedman, *There is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch* (La Salle, 1975).

⁴⁰ See also Claudio Lomnitz, 'Ritual, Rumor, and Corruption in the Constitution of Polity in Modern Mexico', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1995), pp. 20–47.

The final election rally was an orchestrated performance in which disparate groups were united in a wider alliance and charged to vote for its leader in a culturally specific manner. First of all, the widely advertised prospect of such enjoyment attracted a sizeable audience of potential voters from all corners of the municipality. Secondly, it actively worked to relate the individual ejido commissioners to a larger collective, the alliance, which at the outset of the campaign was still very fragmented. In other words, the collective experience made the commissioners feel part of an alliance. Although eating and drinking are embodied activities, the consumption of regional foods and drinks also incorporates the individual in a larger geographical and symbolical whole. The event thus conveyed a sense of common identity, unity and purpose for the alliance, whilst masking existing social divisions. Thirdly, collectively shared passions play a major role in establishing an emotional connection between the leader and his constituency and can enhance a favourable electoral result. Evoking, channelling and capitalising on collectively experienced emotions, such as enjoyment, comradeship and the euphoria of belonging to a winning alliance, had the effect of strengthening the coherence of the alliance. It was not accidental that the organisers carefully monitored the mood of the events as reflected in the audience's emotional responses, such as applause, laughter and satisfaction. Both the number of well-disposed delegates and the convivial atmosphere among them made the organisers more confident of victory. By joining the emotional and the political, the performance of this event related the individual to the collective and its leader in a culturally specific manner.

Nuñez' election rally was not unique and reflected a culturally specific register that is the product of a regional and national (political) history. Firstly, the history of the Northern Coast of Nayarit has been intimately linked with the production of tobacco. During the 1950s and part of the 1960s the region experienced an agricultural boom and tobacco in particular was a most profitable crop. People used to call it *oro verde* (green gold), which gave the Northern Coast its glorious name, *La Costa de Oro*. Today tobacco producers recall those days of plenty. Such memories are often connected with the enjoyment of regionally popular types of alcohol, food and music. When people want to express how much money was earned in those days, they tell you that the cantinas in the region were packed at the time that the companies paid out. Even *ejidatarios* of modest means contracted mariachi groups that played all night long for them, whilst drinking beer until they fell asleep at their table. Politicians like Nuñez also like to refer to this collective mythologised past of the Gold Coast. It corresponds with age-old visions of abundance in the region and also holds out a promise for the future.

Secondly, in Nayarit as in many other states of Mexico, political leaders have a popular tradition of patronising public festivities. During these

gatherings, crowds are feted with beer and local specialities, garnished with revolutionary speeches and live musical performances. During such events in the small state of Nayarit, most politicians, even the governor, are personally approachable to discuss and resolve the needs of ordinary people. Organising these public events, particularly during election time, is a central means to garner popular electoral support for the PRI government, as well as for other political parties. Nuñez acquired such cultural skills through an implicit political training from his patrons, Pérez and Felix Torres. They, in turn, emulated the political style and leadership qualities of the patriarch of Nayarit politics, Don Emilio González, who later became president of the Senate under president Salinas. With a personalist and populist style characteristic of a grand patron he incorporated, united and controlled a great diversity of political actors, forces and groups under the PRI and significantly shaped the political culture of this small state. Towards the end of his life, however, factional divisions increased among several of his protegés and other contenders over his succession, the governorship, the PRI and its corporatist and institutional bases. The above recounted electoral dispute was an expression of this growing disorder in the party.

For his part, Don Emilio was influenced by the populism of his own patron, Fidel Velázquez, national leader of corporatist workers' union, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (Confederation of Mexican Workers, CTM) for more than half a century (1941–47, 1950–97), and by the popular politics of Alejandro Gascon who was mayor of Tepic between 1972 and 1975 and who won the governorship elections of Nayarit for the *Partido Popular Socialista* in 1975. Although the PRI never acknowledged the latter victory and fiercely repressed the opposition during the following six years, during his time as governor, between 1981 and 1987, Don Emilio adopted elements of Gascon's popular politics in order to regain political stability and support among the population. The irony of this situation is that Gascon's patron was Velázquez' predecessor and the first leader of the CTM, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, who broke with the PRI when he formed the *Partido Popular* in 1948 (later the *Partido Popular Socialista*). Soon afterwards, Fidel Velázquez expelled Toledano from the CTM. This regional and national history also suggests that cultural performance is relevant beyond the boundaries of local politics.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated how, under the influence of neo-liberal reforms, existing cultural genres and patterns of resource allocation that are a product of a regional and national political history are accommodated to a new political, administrative and economic setting. These findings indicate the

problematic nature of technocratic theories that assume that such reforms are a-political, a-historical and empty of culture. To make this argument, the article has illustrated what occurs in a particular case of reform.

The case analysed demonstrated that performative skills and the cultural forms to express them are central to the political enterprise. Nevertheless, since politics is not just symbolic play, it has also shown how this is connected with a regional struggle over power and resources. A political group captures a local institution and uses it as a political platform by appropriating its resources for electoral purposes. In support of its political ambitions to attain elective office, the group draws on the resources to which the WUA provides access, such as water, staff, machines, clients, vehicles, public works, money, alcohol, food and music. This range of resource arrangements served to organise a political campaign in the form of a series of public encounters aimed at mobilising a popular support base. This allowed Nuñez to build a broad alliance of support among ejido commissioners that challenged ARIC's authority as the dominant producer organisation in the region. In addition, these resources enabled Nuñez, his entourage and employees to organise and execute three political meetings in order to secure popular support. At these meetings, the distribution of food and beer among potential voters acquired a central cultural and political importance.

It has not been my intention to argue that every form of local institution is bound to be perverted by politics, although the kind of politics examined here appears particularly erosive of any kind of egalitarian, democratic or sustainable resource management. This is not to argue that this form of politicisation of resource management is necessarily a generalised phenomenon in local institutions in Mexico, but it is also certainly not a new or exceptional development. It is also necessary to emphasise that performative skills alone do not guarantee continuity in power; most of the principle actors discussed here lost power at a later stage and several switched to other parties when the PRI lost elections. Nevertheless, cultural repertoires are reproduced in response to political and administrative changes and accommodated to new settings. This often results in a variety of regional outcomes in the distribution and flow of political power and resources.

The situational analysis and ethnography of cultural performance presented here have provided an illustration of three phenomena that receive increasing attention in the literature 'on the political': culture and everyday organisational life, the role of ritual, and the part that passion plays in politics. Permitting politics to re-enter the analysis of resource management has another great advantage, in that it allows for the normalisation of politics. This connects with a growing body of literature that is moving away from a state-centred perspective towards a more de-centred approach that includes culture and everyday organisational practices in the understanding of

politics.⁴¹ The line of analysis advanced here contributes three insights to this literature: first, that its argument is reinforced in an era of political decentralisation, democratic pluralisation and agricultural deregulation, second, that a cultural perspective on power is relevant to administrative settings and, third, that the increased local and regional control over resources formerly in the hands of the federal state opens up new de-centred spaces for political mobilisation. Of course, this is a development that is not limited to WUAs, but occurs more generally. Whether this is necessarily always a positive development in terms of improved resource allocation depends on which actors or political forces emerge to occupy these spaces and the way in which they draw upon, accommodate or renew existing cultural repertoires.

Secondly, analysing the final election rally as a cultural performance has illustrated how resources are mobilised politically, not simply in an instrumental manner, but also according to culturally appealing, meaningful and established ways of engaging in politics. This perspective coincides with a development in the contemporary literature that stresses the role of ritual in Mexican politics. In my understanding, cultural performance is a particular type of ritual that allows a degree of creative imagination to the performing actors and their spectators. Several authors convincingly show why ritual is central to Mexican political culture.⁴² Throughout colonial and post-colonial history, successive authoritarian regimes have restricted public spheres and political discussion and thus promoted public ritual ‘as an arena where political decisions are negotiated and enacted’. In Lomnitz’ view, ‘the importance of ritual, of festivities, and the redistributive actions that are associated with them’, is historically linked to state expansion and ‘the conflicting demands of antagonistic local groups’ that it generates.⁴³ This article has illustrated that something similar occurs under a retrenching state, where local political groups struggle over the control of policy areas and the accompanying resources in a culturally specific and ritualised manner.

Thirdly, cultural performance shows how passions are mobilised politically.⁴⁴ By personally distributing food and alcohol among his supporters, the prospective leader establishes an emotional connection by contributing to a celebratory state of mind and body. This positive excitement is further channelled as a flow of passion that serves an electoral cause. Such political use of passion is of course nothing new. Aristotle already discerned three forms of persuasion: *logos* (reason or argumentation), *ethos* (character, credibility, reputation) and *pathos* (emotion). Hence, as illustrated here, politics and

⁴¹ Rubin, *Decentering the Regime* and Aitken, ‘Localizing Politics’.

⁴² Beezley et al., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance*; Adler Lomnitz et al., *Simbolismo y Ritual*, and Lomnitz, ‘Ritual, Rumor, and Corruption’.

⁴³ Lomnitz, ‘Ritual, Rumor, and Corruption’. p. 20.

⁴⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London, 2005), p. 25.

policy cannot be reduced to discursive and rational exercises (logos), but also involve the enactment of character (ethos) and cultural acts that engage the human body and spirit emotionally (pathos). In sum, my focus on cultural performance generates a conclusion similar to Mouffe's: 'The mistake of liberal rationalism is to ignore the affective dimension mobilised by collective identifications and to imagine that those archaic "passions" are bound to disappear with the advance of individualism and the progress of rationalism.'⁴⁵

To reinforce this point of passion and illustrate why cultural performance has much relevance beyond local politics, we need only recall Thanksgiving Day 2003 when, roughly a year before his re-election, President Bush made a surprise visit to the American soldiers that had recently taken Baghdad. In front of the press, he posed in an army jacket among his soldiers. From a nearby table he picked up and held a dish with a big, beautiful turkey. Several of the military present had to smile in response to this jovial act of their leader. These pictures went around the world and generated the impression that the American president was personally serving this typical dish on this special day to the soldiers that had served him. This, to thank his compatriots on behalf of the nation and lead them in celebrating the 'success' of his military policy. In retrospect, White House officials admitted that the bird was made of plastic. The purpose of crafting such events was to 'showcase Bush', 'accurately dramatize his policies' and convey his real qualities. '[I]t captured that he really cares about the soldiers and gets emotional when he sees them'.⁴⁶ This 'cultural performance of policy success'⁴⁷ boosted domestic polls and military morale. The dramatic impact of a president who feeds his soldiers displays how passion nurtures politics.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2003, p. A33.

⁴⁷ Edwin Rap, 'The Success of a Policy Model: Irrigation Management Transfer in Mexico'.