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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Quality or Complexion? Experience and Skin Tone as Determinants of Electoral Success in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Recent research suggest that skin color discrimination influences electoral outcomes. This article tests the empirical robustness and generalizability of these findings, incorporating candidates' quality as an alternative explanation for electoral success.

Methods: We examine data from the 2024 General Election in Mexico. In addition to the variables considered by others before (i.e., human-coded complexion, incumbency, college degree, sex, age, party), we include one machine-coded skin tone measure, education level and, notably, disaggregate experience variables (government, legislative, and partisan).

Results: Our results indicate little, if any, support for the idea that skin tone is a significant predictor for electoral outcomes in Mexico. Conversely, legislative experience and partisanship appear to be the most significant determinants of electoral success.

Conclusions: Rather than disproving the existence of skin tone discrimination in Mexico, our findings reveal that electoral contests are not the best site to test the political salience of skin color in Mexico.

1 | Introduction

For decades now, research has demonstrated that candidates' quality plays a critical role in elections. Voters value not only ideological positions but personal qualities, and sometimes the latter more than the former (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Francia and Morris 2022). Studies also show that political experience is often the best predictor of quality because experienced candidates benefit from their existing visibility, networks, financial resources, and knowledge of the relevant political district (Fiorina 1994; Norris 1997).

These theoretical explanations have been empirically confirmed in Latin America, with research revealing that candidates' personal attributes and previous experience are important predictors of political success (Love 2009; Montaña 2020). However, a growing body of literature in the region has started to study the

impact of skin tone in electoral politics, and to reveal that, at least in some cases, societal colorism (Dixon and Telles 2017; Monk 2021)—which is well documented in Latin America (Monk 2016; Telles 2014)—translates over into the political arena, affecting the chances that dark-skinned candidates have of being elected to office (Campos and Machado 2018; De Micheli 2023; Janusz 2018; Janusz et al. 2023; Machado et al. 2019).

In Mexico, the topic remains critically understudied. A few small-scale experiments suggest that skin tone affects people's electoral preferences (Aguilar 2011), and there is some evidence of color-based legislative marginalization (Rejón 2024b). Only one study has directly examined the relationship between skin color and electoral success; this pioneering work found dark-skinned candidates to have 20%–38% less probability of winning (Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021). However, the study did not consider the well-established, and most plausible, theoretical

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explanation for electoral success: candidates' quality, operationalized through variables that record experience in elected office, legislatures bodies, or party bureaucracy.

For these reasons—while commending these spearheading studies and their notable contributions—in this article, we point out (and redress) some of their limitations. The full details of these shortcomings are unpacked in Section 1. For now, note that we replicate the analysis with completely transparent methods, fully available data and including most, if not all, relevant control variables. In addition to the variables previous studies considered in their analyses, we include one machine-coded skin tone measure, discrete education levels, and, importantly, disaggregated experience variables to account for candidates' government, legislative and partisan experience. Overall, we find little, if any, evidence to argue that dark skin tones are an electoral disadvantage in Mexico. Instead, we find legislative experience and partisanship to be the best predictors for electoral success.

To achieve its purposes, this article is structured as follows. In Section 1, we set the theoretical framework of our analysis and posit testable hypotheses. Section 2 outlines the political, sociohistorical, and electoral context of our study. In Section 3, we explain our sources and describe our data, which include two distinct measures of skin tone (machine- and human-coded) and multiple robust variables to account for candidates' quality. In Section 4, we present and discuss the results of statistical models testing the impact of candidates' skin tone and quality on electoral outcomes, controlling for variables such as sex, age, education, party, and state. Our results suggest that quality, rather than complexion, is the best predictor for electoral success in Mexico. We conclude the article explaining what these results entail for the study of electoral colorism in Mexico.

2 | Theoretical Framework

Understanding the determinants of electoral victory has long been one of the main interests of political science. For decades, the answers to this question orbited around political parties. Scholars argued that electoral outcomes and voter behavior were determined by party ideology and how political parties controlled nominations and managed campaigns (Brady 1988; Silbey 1991).

However, some noted the importance of candidates' non-ideological factors such as leadership, competence, and personal appeal in determining election results. For instance, valence theory posited that voters are influenced not only by candidates' ideological stance but their personal qualities (Stokes 1963). These ideas found empirical support as researchers noted that—even in party-dominated systems—the characteristics of individual candidates significantly influenced electoral outcomes. Kitschelt (1994) found that voters—increasingly disillusioned with traditional party politics—sought “professional” candidates who demonstrated effective leadership. Others showed that personal qualities sometimes eclipsed policy platforms (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000), particularly in competitive races (Stone and Simas 2010). It is now well established that voters are strongly influenced by their perception of attributes such as honesty, competence, and compassion, sometimes even more than by policy preferences (Francia and Morris 2022; Miller and Shanks 1996).

Research also reveals that these perceived traits are often predicted by previous political experience and years of service in office because experienced candidates already have visibility, networks, financial resources, and knowledge of the relevant political districts (Di Renzo 1967; Fiorina 1994; Fowler and McClure 1989; Norris 1997; Schlesinger 1966). Some scholars call this “political capital” (Alcántara-Sáez 2017) or “candidate quality” (Cox and McCubbins 1993) and see it as a key determinant of success in a politician's career. It makes sense for parties to strategically recruit “quality” candidates, to boost their chances of winning elections, especially competitive ones (Carson et al. 2007; Cox and McCubbins 1993).

This theory has been tested empirically in the United States (Carey and Shugart 1995; Carson et al. 2007) and other contexts, including Mexico, where research has shown that candidates perceived as having certain personal qualities can outperform those with weaker personal appeal (Alcántara Sáez 2011; Alcántara-Sáez 2017). Furthermore, research demonstrates that incumbency is not the only relevant kind of experience. Evidence from Brazil suggests that candidates' experience running campaign for office is relevant too—even if they lose—because it gives them expertise, networks, and visibility, which can be beneficial in future elections (Haime et al. 2022). Therefore, diverse kinds of experience could have differentiated effects in electoral outcomes.

Scholars in Mexico traditionally underplayed the role of individual candidates in favor of party-centered explanations too, arguing that Mexico's electoral system (and the prohibition of immediate reelection in particular) reduced candidates to mere instruments of party strategy (Poiré Romero 2002). However, recent studies challenged this view arguing that the attributes of individual candidates in Mexico are important, particularly as the political landscape in the country became more competitive (Diaz-Cayeros and Langston 2004; Magaloni 2006). This novel research showed that prior political experience allowed candidates to take advantage of their personal political capital, even in the absence of party support or favorable electoral conditions (León and Berasaluce 2020; Love 2009; Montañó 2020).

In recent years, however, a new answer has been posited to the electoral victory question. Research shows that people use “mental shortcuts” to make decisions in life (Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011) and politics (Aguilar et al. 2019; Lau and Redlawsk 2001), and when they lack relevant information, they resort to prejudices to judge the capacities of electoral candidates, letting factors such as appearance and perceived beauty drive their votes (Ahler et al. 2017; Lawson et al. 2010; Little et al. 2007; Todorov et al. 2005). In a colorist context where skin tone is taken to be an indicator of beauty, competence, and other positive traits (Dixon and Telles 2017; Hunter 2005, 2007, 2011; Jha and Adelman 2009; Monk 2021), this could entail that the assessment of the quality of dark-skinned candidates might be distorted by biases and prejudices. Hence, complexion—the skin tone of politicians—could influence electoral outcomes.

Besides some notable exceptions (Ahuja et al. 2016; Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021; De Micheli 2023; Johnson 2020), most of this research focus on the United States (Stephens-

Dougan 2021). For instance, some studies found that Black candidates are penalized based on their race by Whiter voters (Hannon 2015; Johnson Carew 2016; Lemi and Brown 2019; Terkildsen 1993) but supported by members of the same ethnoracial group (Leigh and Susilo 2009). Others found that skin color operates as a shortcut in candidate evaluation (Boudreau et al. 2019; Lerman et al. 2015; Weaver 2012), and more recent studies reveal changing trends in how skin tone is perceived and assessed by both Whites and traditionally minoritized groups (Aguilar et al. 2019; Ostfeld and Yadon 2022a; Yadon and Ostfeld 2020).

The impact of skin tone on electoral politics is relatively well studied in countries such as Brazil (Campos and Machado 2018; De Micheli 2023; Janusz 2018; Machado et al. 2019) and Ecuador (Janusz et al. 2023), but the extent of the generalizability of these findings is yet to be assessed. In Mexico, the topic remains critically understudied. While scarce experimental research suggests that skin tone affects people's electoral preferences (Aguilar 2011) and there is some evidence of skin color-based legislative marginalization (Rejón 2024b), only one study has directly examined the relationship between skin tone and electoral success (Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021). The article found that in the 2018 Mexican General Election, dark-skinned candidates had 20%–38% less probability of winning.

While notable, this pioneering article has certain limitations, some of which the authors explicitly acknowledge. First, the portraits were classified by independent human coders and an automated algorithm; those scores were then averaged to obtain a skin color variable, which was then collapsed into groups. No technical details on this classification algorithm are provided, so it is impossible to assess the accuracy of the resulting variable. Second, while conceding that skin color estimators might be biased “if there are omitted variables correlated with skin tone, such as year of schooling or political experience” (Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021, 861), the authors do not control for candidate's quality. This omission is not minor because the correlations between skin tone and education level are well documented in Mexico (Martinez et al. 2014; Rejón 2023; Trejo and Altamirano 2016) and given that quality and experience are the best alternative theoretical explanations for electoral success.

In this article, we recreate and extend the empirical robustness of this important analysis: we use an open-source classification algorithm and control for most, if not all, relevant variables. Our data and methods are explained in detail in the subsequent sections. Before moving on, based on this review on the literature of the determinants of electoral success, we set up the following testable hypotheses:

- *Discrimination hypothesis*: If skin tone is relevant in Mexico, we expect skin color to be a predictor for electoral success, and dark-skinned candidates to perform worse than lighter skinned candidates.
- *Quality hypothesis*: If the quality of the candidate (operationalized through their political experience) is the main predictor of electoral victory, we should expect experienced candidates to perform better than their peers, regardless of their skin tone.

3 | Context

3.1 | Political System

The Mexican Chamber of Deputies is made up by 500 legislators—300 compete in elections and 200 are selected through a system of proportional representation. In elections, voters cast a single ballot that serves to select a candidate for their respective single-member district (SMD) under the plurality system, while simultaneously contributing to the overall party vote for the proportional representation allocation.

The SMD electoral system operates on a first-past-the-post basis, wherein the candidate securing the highest number of votes within a district is awarded the corresponding legislative seat, irrespective of achieving an absolute majority of votes. For these purposes, Mexico is geographically partitioned into 300 federal electoral districts, each serving as an uninominal constituency. These districts are defined based on demographic parity, ensuring they encompass a comparable population size (~420,000 in the 2024 election). This equitable distribution is periodically recalibrated through a process known as redistricting, using rigorous methodologies to adapt district boundaries accordingly to shifts in population dynamics.

It is worth noting that immediate legislative re-election has been historically prohibited, but it was re-introduced in 2014, which shifted power dynamics within political parties, setting a path toward professionalization and, arguably, undermining the control party elites have over legislators as sole sponsors of their political future (Langston 2022). However, re-election remains a strongly controlled process. Party leaderships play a decisive role as gatekeepers in filtering candidates and determining who can run for re-election (Bárcena et al. 2024).

3.2 | Historical and Cultural

As most Spanish colonies, the Vice-Royalty of New Spain implemented a “Sistema de Castas” that privileged “racial purity” (Russell 2010, 50). After gaining its independence, Mexico institutionally abolished this system but inherited its social practices (Martinez et al. 2014; Moreno 2010). To redress this, Mexican progressive elites embraced the myth of *mestizaje* as a nation-building narrative to counter ethnoracial unjust dynamics. The government promoted the idea that extensive Spanish-Indigenous miscegenation produced a racially homogeneous society and a single *cosmic* race—the mestizo (Martinez et al. 2014; Vasconcelos 1948). This myth was embedded not only in public discourse, but in government programs and policies. For instance, the government rendered certain groups invisible (i.e. Afro-Mexicans) and shaped people's perceptions of themselves through the way they did (not) ask questions in the census (Angosto Ferrández and Kradolfer 2012). Ultimately, the project of *mestizaje* managed to remove notions of “race” but failed to eradicate the racist practices behind them (Moreno 2010). The result has been described as a synergy between racism and *mestizaje* in which people celebrate their racial mixture at the time they desire phenotypic whiteness (Sue 2020).

The pervasiveness of this discriminatory colonial legacy has been unveiled by recent research, which demonstrate that skin

color marginalization continues to impact both interpersonal relationships and larger well-being indicators—that is, education and income social mobility (Arceo-Gomez and Campos-Vazquez 2014; Campos-Vazquez and Medina-Cortina 2019; Moreno 2008; Trejo and Altamirano 2016).

3.3 | Electoral

In this political system and cultural context, the largest election in Mexican history took place. The 2024 general election in Mexico put ~20,000 posts up for grabs, and it summoned ~100 million voters: the most participative election in Mexican history.

The electoral contest presented voters with two main political coalitions that represented continuity versus change. The former embodied in *Sigamos Haciendo Historia* (SHH)—Morena, PT, Partido Verde—and the latter in *Fuerza y Corazón por México* (FCM)—PAN, PRI, PRD. For many, this election was a referendum on people’s approval of the outgoing president—Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

SHH positioned itself as the continuation of AMLO’s “Fourth Transformation” agenda, which emphasizes social welfare (i.e., direct cash transfers), state-led development (i.e., subsidies), and a populist approach to governance (Herdoiza 2024). In contrast, FCM campaigned around undoing many of AMLO’s reforms, promising to restore checks and balances, demilitarize the country, and promote greater economic freedom through the private sector (Sevilla-Macip 2024).

Candidates for SHH often presented themselves as technocrats, blending academic expertise with political experience, which enhanced their perceived competence. In contrast, the opposition coalition FCM recruited a mix of experienced politicians and outsiders, including professionals from the private sector, who advocated for a return to more market-oriented policies and democratic governance.

Notably, the role of re-election added another dimension to the analysis of candidate quality. Since the introduction of immediate re-election for legislators in 2014, the proportion of deputies with prior legislative experience increased significantly. However, despite these trends toward professionalization, re-election remains a tightly controlled process. Party leaderships play a decisive role in determining who can run for re-election, serving as gatekeepers in filtering candidates based on their legislative performance and loyalty to party goals (Bárcena et al. 2024).

For these reasons, the Mexican 2024 General Election represents a great opportunity for understanding the electoral role of candidate quality within a rapidly evolving political landscape. It provides a unique chance to examine how skin color—and varying dimensions of candidate quality—intersect with the broader institutional and socio-cultural mechanisms governing elections.

4 | Data and Methods

Two official datasets are the main sources of information for our analysis. Both databases were published by the National Electoral Institute (INE) for the 2024 General Election. The first one, titled “Candidates, get to know them” (INE 2024a), compiles

the information that Mexican laws required politicians to share on their political and professional background, along with their policy proposals.

From the data available on the candidates’ biographical information, we coded several variables. *Sex* is a categorical variable distinguishing between male, female, and non-binary individuals. These categories reflect the self-reported gender identities of the candidates. *Degree* is also a categorical variable; its categories include “Secondary School,” “High School,” “Undergraduate,” “Masters or Specialty,” “Doctorate +,” and “Other.” This variable is based on the degree that the candidates reported but not identical; the original dataset includes self-reported degree and whether this was completed or ongoing, while our variable reports only the highest academic degree candidates completed.

Given the importance of candidates’ quality in our analysis, based on the biographical data reported in INE’s dataset, we coded three different binary variables for experience in government or public administration (*Government*), legislative roles (*Legislative*), and participation in the bureaucratic structures of political parties (*Party*). These disaggregated variables are a significant contribution and have the potential to provide insights on the differentiated impacts of the candidates’ diverse kinds of experience; they help quantitatively evaluate candidates’ quality, considering the multiple domains in which professional-political expertise can be acquired, while establishing a hierarchical gradation based on the relative significance and impact of each type of experience.

Government is assessed across three levels: federal, state, and municipal. Candidates with at least 1 year of experience in federal, state, or municipal public administration were coded positively. For *Legislative* experience, we coded positively all candidates with at least 1 year of experience as the primary officeholder (propietario) in the Senate, the Federal Chamber of Deputies, or the State Chambers of Deputies. Finally, *Party* accounts for bureaucratic experience within political parties and was dichotomously coded: candidates were positively coded if they had held formal positions within the organizational structure of a political party for at least 1 year, prior to their nomination as candidates, ensuring to reflect their true engagement in party bureaucracy. Importantly, this criterion applied regardless of whether the party in question was the one nominating the candidate for the 2024 election. Roles such as candidacies, advisory positions, or participation in electoral organizing bodies were explicitly excluded. This last evaluation criterion measures the relevance of familiarity of candidates with party dynamics and organizational skills, which are critical for effective political leadership.

The methodological underpinning of this coding system is predicated on the recognition that professional experience in the political arena is not homogeneous. Each domain contributes distinctively to the development of competencies necessary for electoral performance. This approach ensures that the evaluation is both rigorous and multidimensional, facilitating transparent and objective comparisons among candidates.

The second dataset comprises the official “compútos distritales”—district tallies—of the General Election (INE 2024b). The database is disaggregated by voting booth, state, and electoral district, and it shows the total amount of votes each

party or coalition received. We processed these data to obtain total vote share and a winner for each electoral contest.

After obtaining aggregated results for each electoral contest, we appended this information on electoral outcomes to the candidates dataset so that each observation has variables for share of votes obtained and winning/losing the contest. Then, we filtered the data to discard candidates in presidential, senatorial, and proportional representation races; keeping only the candidates that competed in direct electoral contests for the 300 single-member districts. This resulted in a dataset of 992 candidates in total, which is the one we use to conduct all our analyses.

The way in which we produced our skin tone variables is explained in detail below. For now, it is important to note these were produced from portraits that came mainly from INE's database, but 140 candidates did not provide their photo to the electoral authority. To buttress our sample, we decided to manually compile the rest of the portraits. Most of these "extra" photos came from www.sabervotar.mx, an online platform launched by election watchers with the aim to promote political participation and informed voting. For the few instances where portraits were not available in this platform either, we resorted to the System of Legislative Information of the Chamber of Deputies (for when candidates won the election) and, as a last resource, the media. Still, we were not able to find portraits for seven candidates, of which six were women, three were from Chiapas, two from Oaxaca, and one from Guerrero. Given that some of the electoral districts within these states are rural, it is somehow expected that not all candidates in the race would provide their portraits. Also, out of these seven candidates, five ran for Movimiento Ciudadano (MC) and two for *Fuerza y Corazón por México*. None of them won the election. In fact, none of them surpassed 10% of the vote share. We processed all data in RStudio, and our final database—along with the replication files—are available as Supporting Information to this article.

Now, when it comes to skin tone, there are a few things worth noting. First, we want to clearly distance our analysis from the debate on whether skin tone discrimination in Mexico constitutes a case of colorism or racism. Most Latin America scholars concede that race and skin color are overlapping and intertwined (Morales Silva et al. 2024; Telles 2004, 2012) and that the region can be best described as racially "fluid" (De Micheli 2018, 2021; Irizarry et al. 2023; Marrow 2003). However, there is some disagreement on whether these two terms are conceptually distinct or completely interchangeable (Htun 2016, 165; Mitchell-Walthour 2017, Chap. 1; Monk 2016, 415, 2021, 80; Saldívar 2014, 90). We see no need to take a stance in this debate but simply report the effect we find these "skin tone" variables to have.

Second, there is the issue of how "skin tone" is measured. Methods have varied across different geographic regions and academic disciplines: verbal scales, color palettes, photo elicitation, and spectrometers (Dixon and Telles 2017). In Latin America, interviewers have classified respondents in a palette of colors when they meet their respondents in person (Telles et al. 2015), but many have opted to classify portraits instead (Campos and Machado 2018; Htun 2016; Janusz et al. 2023). The large size and

disperse location of our sample makes it unfeasible to follow the first method, so we employed the second option.

Furthermore, there are different methods to classify portraits, all with advantages and disadvantages of their own. Within social sciences, asking independent coders to classify the subjects is the most common method, but it does not go without objection. Ironically, its strengths are its weaknesses. Studies demonstrate that "independent" coders are not neutral at all: external factors (i.e., names, hair, cloths, code sequences, and sex) influence their assessment and make them very volatile (Abrajano et al. 2023; Campbell and Troyer 2007; Garcia and Abascal 2016; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Hill 2002b, 2002a; Monk 2015; Perreira and Telles 2014). Effectively, then, this method records how others react to an individual based not only on their skin color but a broader "racial schema" (Sen and Wasow 2016, 506; Wade 2012). This is not necessarily wrong, as long as these caveats are considered. We include a variable of this type and call it *Complexion*: two Mexican coders independently classified the skin color of each candidate using the PERLA palette (Telles 2014). Following similar studies (Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021; Janusz et al. 2023), we averaged the independent scores for each legislator.

However, to strengthen the analysis, we also include a skin color variable processed with Rejón and Ma's (2023) automated algorithm: CASCo (a Python library that automatically detects the skin color of the face area of a given portrait and classifies it to one of the categories in the PERLA color palette). This algorithm assesses skin tone exclusively, effectively ignoring all other factors impacting human perception (i.e., gender, clothes, facial hair, perceived beauty, and class).

While these two "skin tone" variables might seem to measure the same thing, they are different, and it is worth including both in the analysis. CASCo variable was coded using an automated classification algorithm that focuses exclusively (and objectively) in the skin tone of the face area of the portrait; *Complexion* variable was coded by humans, who inevitably observe other (phenotypical and class) markers into account. For these reasons, these two variables capture two different phenomena, as CASCo considers only one element of the racial schema (i.e., skin tone), and *Complexion* reflects a broader range of elements of the racial schema (albeit not all).

Recent studies suggest that the extent to which non-epidermic traits (i.e., hair, lips, gender) contribute to the "transcoloration"—whitening or darkening—of perceived skin tone has been underestimated (Krozer and Gómez 2023; Solís and Güémez 2020; Solís and Reyes Martínez 2023). Some of these studies have looked at the impact of these different traits on socioeconomic variables and found that the effect of skin color is different to that of other features—sometimes just in intensity but others also in direction (Reyes-Martínez et al. 2023; Solís et al. 2023). Given these inconclusive precedents, it is worth examining the different effects these variables might have on electoral outcomes. Others have recently used similar combined approaches, considering both "machine-rated" and "self-assessed" skin color variables in their analysis (Ostfeld and Yadon 2022b). Employing both skin tone measurements offers a more comprehensive analysis, while mitigating the potentially negative effect of the discrepancy between variables.

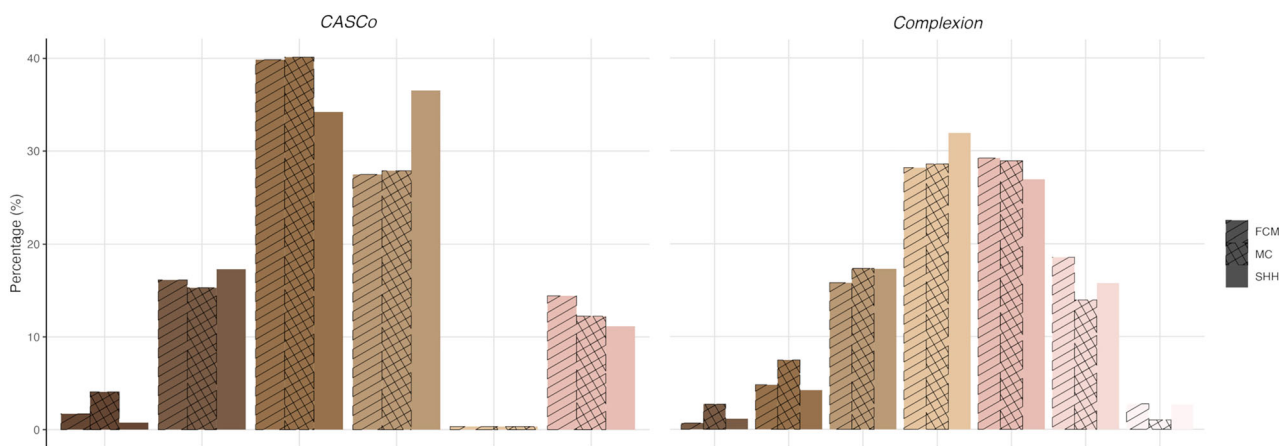


FIGURE 1 | Skin tone distribution of the candidates nominated by each electoral coalition.

TABLE 1 | Generalized linear regression models: Skin tone and electoral victory.

Variable	CASCo					Complexion				
	Coeff	se	z	ρ	α	Coeff	se	z	ρ	α
(Intercept)	-1.968	1.778	-1.107	0.268		-1.190	1.483	-0.803	0.422	
CASCo5	0.733	1.312	0.559	0.576						
CASCo6	0.839	1.296	0.648	0.517						
CASCo7	0.691	1.298	0.533	0.594						
CASCo8	0.505	2.716	0.186	0.852						
CASCo9	0.269	1.329	0.203	0.839						
Complexion						-0.027	0.111	-0.242	0.809	
Woman	-0.474	0.254	-1.869	0.062	.	-0.447	0.252	-1.772	0.076	.
Age	-0.025	0.012	-2.022	0.043	*	-0.024	0.012	-1.994	0.046	*
High school	-0.154	1.094	-0.141	0.888		-0.043	1.085	-0.040	0.968	
Undergraduate	0.203	1.051	0.193	0.847		0.336	1.038	0.324	0.746	
Masters or specialty	0.253	1.062	0.239	0.811		0.387	1.054	0.367	0.713	
Doctorate +	0.214	1.183	0.181	0.857		0.389	1.172	0.332	0.740	
Other	-0.036	1.101	-0.033	0.974		0.082	1.092	0.075	0.940	
Government experience	0.185	0.288	0.642	0.521		0.148	0.287	0.518	0.605	
Legislative experience	1.275	0.285	4.469	0.000	***	1.267	0.284	4.458	0.000	***
Party experience	0.148	0.253	0.584	0.559		0.136	0.252	0.539	0.590	
MC	-3.472	1.025	-3.387	0.001	***	-3.490	1.025	-3.407	0.001	***
SHH	3.781	0.276	13.679	0.000	***	3.766	0.274	13.758	0.000	***

Note: Signif. codes: 0 '***', 0.001 '**', 0.01 '*', 0.05 '.', 0.1 ' '.

5 | Findings and Discussion

Perhaps the best way to start the presentation of our findings is looking at the skin tone distribution of the candidates that each coalition endorsed for the general election. Figure 1 shows these data using both of our skin color variables for the top three coalitions: SHH, FCM, and MC. First, it is worth noting that the automated variable (CASCo) identifies candidates only between levels 4–9 of the PERLA palette, while human coders see “Whiter”—classifying candidates in levels 5–11. The differences between the two variables most likely

derive from the effect of “impressionistic race” we flagged above, and has been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Rejón 2025).

Notably, the opposition (FCM) is the Whitest coalition in both variables, even if only marginally. This matches the idea that center and right-wing parties—traditionally associated with business owners and higher middle class—nominate lighter candidates because class and skin tone are correlated in Mexico (Cerón-Anaya 2020; Krozer 2019; Rejón 2024b). However, SHH is not necessarily the “darkest” coalition, as most of their candidates fall

TABLE 2 | Generalized linear regression models: Skin tone and vote share.

Variable	CASCo					Complexion				
	Coeff	se	z	ρ	α	Coeff	se	z	ρ	α
(Intercept)	25.808	3.513	7.346	0.000	***	22.456	3.515	6.389	0.000	***
CASCo5	2.732	2.130	1.283	0.200						
CASCo6	2.233	2.056	1.086	0.278						
CASCo7	2.305	2.076	1.110	0.267						
CASCo8	1.548	5.182	0.299	0.765						
CASCo9	2.499	2.181	1.146	0.252						
Complexion						0.738	0.263	2.807	0.005	**
Woman	-0.309	0.623	-0.496	0.620		-0.473	0.618	-0.765	0.445	
Age	-0.068	0.029	-2.315	0.021	*	-0.061	0.029	-2.068	0.039	*
High school	-0.423	2.550	-0.166	0.868		-0.910	2.536	-0.359	0.720	
Undergraduate	2.244	2.432	0.923	0.356		1.710	2.419	0.707	0.480	
Masters or specialty	2.450	2.475	0.990	0.323		1.704	2.470	0.690	0.490	
Doctorate +	3.099	2.808	1.104	0.270		2.211	2.801	0.789	0.430	
Other	0.547	2.494	0.220	0.826		0.031	2.484	0.013	0.990	
Government experience	2.023	0.797	2.538	0.011	*	1.988	0.789	2.519	0.012	*
Legislative experience	7.405	0.808	9.166	0.000	***	7.252	0.802	9.043	0.000	***
Party experience	0.966	0.665	1.451	0.147		0.938	0.661	1.419	0.156	
MC	-16.166	0.825	-19.599	0.000	***	-16.06	0.820	-19.58	0.000	***
SHH	23.260	0.822	28.299	0.000	***	23.352	0.816	28.634	0.000	***

Note: Signif. codes: 0 '***', 0.001 '**', 0.01 '*', 0.05 '.', 0.1 '.'.

within the light-brown categories (34.2% and 36.5% in PERLA 6 and 7, according to CASCo; and 31.9% and 26.9% in PERLA 8 and 9, according to Complexion). Perhaps, across both variables, MC was the coalition nominating a higher percentage of candidates in the darker categories; interestingly, they were, too, the least successful coalition.

Now, were any of these differences statistically significant for electoral outcomes? We tested this through four different approaches using a binary variable for electoral victory and a continuous variable for vote share. Employing these two variables helps us observe not only which candidates won but how tight the electoral contest was. To avoid any potential collinearity issues, we run separate models for CASCo and Complexion. In all models, we control for multiple variables, including sex, age, education, experience (government, legislative, party), party, and state. For conciseness, we exclude from our tables here the variables that were never significant (State) and the ones with too little observations (non-binary for sex, and individual parties rather than coalitions).

First, following Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera (2021), we ran two generalized linear regression models across all candidates, using both variables for electoral outcome. In Table 1, we find that women are less likely than men to win to a marginally significant level and that age has a statistically significant negative effect on winning. However, none of the skin tone variables are significant predictors at all, along with education, and government and party experience. Notably, legislative experience and

party affiliation are the variables with a highly significant strong positive effect on winning.

We also look at how these variables predict vote share (Table 2) and find that while CASCo continues to be an insignificant predictor, Complexion is statistically significant, indicating that candidates with lighter skin tones are associated with a higher vote: for every unit increase in Complexion, predicted vote share increases 0.738%.

Similar to the previous model, age shows a slight negative relationship with vote share, and education shows no significance at all. In this case, legislative experience continues to have very significant positive effects, while government experience has slightly significant effects. Notably, party experience has no significant effects. In our CASCo model, for each additional unit in government and legislative experience, the predicted vote share increases 2.02% and 7.4%, respectively. While the increase is of 0.79% and 0.8% in the Complexion models.

Note that these analyses have not taken into account the stratified nature of the general election. That is, not all candidates competed against each other. There were 300 electoral contests (one for each SMD). To test the impact of skin color in electoral outcome, it is best to control for electoral contest (district) and compare only candidates who competed against each other. This is precisely what we do in the models displayed in Tables 3 and 4, using a multilevel logistic regression and a conditional logistic regression (respectively).

TABLE 3 | Multilevel logistic regressions: Skin tone and electoral victory (controlled by district/electoral contest).

Variable	CASCo					Complexion				
	Coeff	se	z	ρ	α	Coeff	se	z	ρ	α
(Intercept)	-1.968	1.778	-1.107	0.268		-1.190	1.483	-0.803	0.422	
CASCo5	0.733	1.312	0.559	0.576						
CASCo6	0.839	1.296	0.648	0.517						
CASCo7	0.691	1.298	0.533	0.594						
CASCo8	0.505	2.716	0.186	0.852						
CASCo9	0.269	1.329	0.203	0.839						
Complexion						-0.027	0.111	-0.242	0.809	
Woman	-0.474	0.254	-1.869	0.062	.	-0.447	0.252	-1.772	0.076	.
Age	-0.025	0.012	-2.022	0.043	*	-0.024	0.012	-1.994	0.046	*
High school	-0.154	1.094	-0.141	0.888		-0.043	1.085	-0.040	0.968	
Undergraduate	0.203	1.051	0.193	0.847		0.336	1.038	0.324	0.746	
Masters or specialty	0.253	1.062	0.239	0.811		0.387	1.054	0.367	0.714	
Doctorate +	0.214	1.183	0.181	0.857		0.389	1.172	0.332	0.740	
Other	-0.036	1.101	-0.033	0.974		0.082	1.092	0.075	0.940	
Government experience	0.185	0.288	0.642	0.521		0.148	0.287	0.518	0.605	
Legislative experience	1.275	0.285	4.469	0.000	***	1.267	0.284	4.458	0.000	***
Party experience	0.148	0.253	0.584	0.559		0.136	0.252	0.539	0.590	
MC	-3.472	1.025	-3.387	0.001	***	-3.490	1.025	-3.407	0.001	***
SHH	3.781	0.276	13.679	0.000	***	3.766	0.274	13.758	0.000	***

Note: Signif. codes: 0 '***', 0.001 '**', 0.01 '*', 0.05 '.', 0.1 '.'.

TABLE 4 | Conditional logistic regressions: Skin tone and electoral victory (controlled by district/electoral contest).

Variable	CASCo					Complexion				
	Coef	Exp(coef)	se(coef)	z	Pr(> z)	Coef	Exp(coef)	se(coef)	z	Pr(> z)
CASCo5	1.234	3.435	1.355	0.911	0.362					
CASCo6	1.369	3.933	1.362	1.005	0.315					
CASCo7	1.096	2.992	1.333	0.822	0.411					
CASCo8	1.385	3.996	3.000	0.462	0.644					
CASCo9	0.651	1.917	1.366	0.476	0.634					
Complexion						-0.122	0.885	0.124	-0.989	0.323
Woman	-0.588	0.555	0.281	-2.094	0.036	-0.526	0.591	0.272	-1.936	0.053
Age	-0.027	0.974	0.013	-2.033	0.042	-0.026	0.974	0.013	-2.005	0.045
High school	-0.126	0.882	1.059	-0.118	0.906	0.032	1.032	1.039	0.030	0.976
Undergraduate	0.327	1.387	0.992	0.330	0.742	0.545	1.725	0.972	0.561	0.575
Masters	0.335	1.398	1.019	0.329	0.742	0.608	1.836	1.003	0.606	0.544
Doctorate +	0.012	1.012	1.110	0.011	0.991	0.218	1.243	1.086	0.201	0.841
Other	0.040	1.041	1.069	0.037	0.970	0.216	1.242	1.050	0.206	0.837
Government exp.	0.168	1.183	0.296	0.567	0.571	0.093	1.098	0.290	0.321	0.748
Legislative exp.	1.311	3.711	0.309	4.238	0.000	1.298	3.664	0.307	4.231	0.000
Party exp.	0.158	1.171	0.272	0.581	0.561	0.157	1.169	0.270	0.581	0.561
MC	-3.303	0.037	1.024	-3.224	0.001	-3.381	0.034	1.024	-3.301	0.001
SHH	2.072	7.939	0.235	8.820	0.000	2.029	7.605	0.229	8.872	0.000

Table 3 shows generalized linear mixed models where electoral victory is accounted through a binary dependent variable; it includes a random intercept to account for clustering by electoral contest and a logit link function to predict the probability of winning. Interestingly, near-zero variance for electoral contest suggests that the random intercept does not explain much additional variability in the probability of winning beyond the fixed effects. Like previous models, we find CASCo and Complexion to lack predictive power and no significant effect in winning. Again, sex and education are insignificant, while age shows slight significance. In these models, again, government and party experience are not significant, but legislative experience makes candidates much more likely to win. The effects of partisanship remain powerfully predictive.

Lastly, we conduct a conditional logistic regression to test the relationship between skin tone and electoral victory, stratifying for electoral contest. Again, we find no statistically significant predictive power in the skin color variables. In these models, being a woman implies somewhat lower odds of winning compared to male candidates, and every additional year of age reduces the odds of winning.

Notably, legislative experience and partisanship are the best predictors for electoral success once more. Overall, we find little, if any, support for the *Discrimination hypothesis*. Our data reject the assumption that skin color is a statistically significant predictor for electoral success in Mexico, as it might be in other contexts. All in all, we find strong support for the *Quality hypothesis*, which posits that political experience is the main predictor of electoral outcomes. In all our models, previous experience is the most significant predictor for electoral outcomes, with legislative experience proving to be the most relevant type of experience.

While our findings confirm the best and most common theoretical explanation for electoral success and contradict recent studies on this issue (as reviewed in Section 1), we want to be crystal clear in what we do not think our results imply. While someone might want to use these findings to argue that colorism has no political impact in Mexico or even that skin tone is not a salient axis of oppression in the Mexican context, we simply think elections are not an appropriate locus to make such conclusion. First, research shows that—for multiple reasons—the average Mexican (and Latin American) voter is not particularly prone to cast an informed vote. In fact, they are often susceptible to “machine politics,” vote buying, and electoral discrimination (Agudelo 2002; Johnson 2020). We think the voter is not discriminating against candidates’ skin tone, not necessarily because they do not want to do it, but because they might not even know who the candidates are. This explanation is particularly probable because—unlike other contexts (Leigh and Susilo 2009)—ballots in Mexico display no photos of the candidates, just their name and party.

Second, racial identity is not strongly embedded in Mexican culture yet, and racial literacy has started to develop only recently (Rejón 2024b, 2024a). Other studies show that ethnic voting is directly and positively correlated to racial literacy, political struggle, and linked fate (Ahuja et al. 2016; De Micheli 2021; Mitchell-Walthour 2017). Therefore, the fact that Mexican voters are not using skin tone to decide their vote does not necessarily

mean that colorism is not a real issue in the country; in fact, it might mean the opposite.

Lastly, skin tone might not be salient in Mexican elections because other influences are substantially stronger. Past research shows a large “drag effect” in Mexican General elections, where constituents cast all their (legislative) votes in line to their vote for a presidential candidate (Carey 1994; Nohlen 1994; Shugart and Carey 1992). This explanation has never been timelier, given that the last two general elections have been won by significantly large margins. In 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador won with 53.19% of the votes, and in 2024, Claudia Sheinbaum triumphed by a 30% margin. According to our analysis of INE’s data, the same coalition won all contests (Deputies, Senators, and President) in 91.67% of the electoral districts.

6 | Conclusion

Candidates’ quality has been known to be a critical factor in electoral outcomes for decades now. Voters value personal qualities, sometimes even more than they care for ideological positions. In actuality, the perception of these qualities hinges on a candidate’s previous political experience.

In many contexts, Mexico included, empirical studies reveal that previous experience is an important predictor of political success. However, despite a growing body of literature unveiling colorism in Mexico, almost none of this research considers skin tone as a variable in the analysis. The few studies that account for skin tone are small-scale or present significant omissions. To redress this, we analyzed the results of the 2024 Mexican General Election with completely transparent methods, included most (if not all) relevant control variables, and made our data fully available. Our results indicate little, if any, support for the idea that dark skin tones are an electoral disadvantage in Mexico. Conversely, legislative experience and partisanship appear to be the best predictors for electoral success.

At first view, these findings may appear to challenge the idea that skin color is politically salient in Mexico. However, we are more cautious with our interpretations of the data. Our study includes control variables that other research had failed to include. For instance, Aguilar (2011) run experiments with fictitious candidates but—while she included place of birth, college attended, and professional degree—the candidates in her experiments were not running for any political party and could not possibly have previous visibility and resources, given that they were made up. In real elections, these factors appear to supersede skin tone. Similarly, Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera (2021) study the results of the 2018 General Election but fail to control for candidates’ quality. The authors themselves acknowledge that political party was more salient than skin tone in their study and that their skin color estimates might be biased by confounding variables such as years of schooling and political experience. Again, these variables supersede skin tone in real elections.

Hence, our findings do not necessarily mean that skin tone is politically irrelevant, but that it is certainly not the best predictor for electoral success. They might reveal, instead, that elections are not the best site to test the political salience of

skin tone. Some might think that this is the case because voters do not have much choice (i.e., that in some districts all candidates are fair-skinned or dark-skinned), but this would be imprecise. To address the question of choice, we grouped the skin tones following Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera (2021)—the PERLA categories were re-classified in five groups: White (9,10,11), light brown (8), intermediate (7), brown (6), and dark brown (1,2,3,4,5)—examined which districts and electoral contests had candidates in only one unique group (i.e., only White candidates competing against each other). Out of the 300 districts, only 25 (8.33%) had “no choice” according to CASCo and 18 (6%) according to Complexion. Obviously, without grouping the skin tones, the percentages would be much smaller. This means that most voters did have a choice and could choose between candidates of different skin tones.

However, it is worth noting that ballots in Mexico do not display photos of the candidates and that Mexican voters are usually uninformed and susceptible to “machine politics,” clientelism, and vote buying (Agudelo 2002; Johnson 2020). Also, partisanship and the “drag effect” might be too strong in elections to allow for skin tone to have any impact. Past research on Mexican General elections show constituents tend to cast all their (legislative) votes in line with their vote for the presidential candidate (Carey 1994; Nohlen 1994; Shugart and Carey 1992).

For these reasons, political marginalization based on skin color in Mexico might be better examined in other sites, such as the legislative chambers or the presidents’ cabinets, where these conditions are different. Further research should also investigate in more detail—perhaps qualitatively—the mechanisms that could explain the effects we do observe, such as specific party dynamics.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study is openly available in Figshare at <https://doi.org/10.26188/28179800>.

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