

Words To Win By

Episode 4: Buena Política - Dominican Republic

Transcript

Franiel:

Politics has to be a space for ideas and for the people, not only a space for privilege and power, a place where people fall in love, where the people want to be. Because if the people are not in politics, it allows absolutely anything that has nothing to do with the people to happen.

Theme Song:

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing? And so many others, grieve. By way of they reply, I say a Fool, such as I who sees this song is Somewhere to begin.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Hello. I'm Anat Shenker Osorio. And this is Words to Win by. Today, we're headed to the Dominican Republic where an indomitable team steeped in grassroots activism, but nude electoral politics ran an entirely improbable campaign under the banner Buena Política or good politics. An idea that went beyond their slogan to become the organizing principle infused into every element of their campaign. The voice you heard at the top of the show was a translation of Franiel Genao campaign leader for the political party. Alianza Pais. We also have a Spanish language version of this episode, if you want to hear from Franiel and the other incredible organizers in their own words. But this story begins a little earlier, about 10 years back with Alianza's future nominee José Horacio Rodríguez. He was a youth activist fighting for many causes chiefly against the environmental destruction that major corporations had unleashed. In 2009, a plan to revamp the country's constitution to make it more conservative, further cemented his activism. It was in protesting this constitution that José Horacio first felt drawn to move from outside agitation to insider electoral politics. Here's how he describes it.

Jose :

I remember protesting in front of the National Congress carrying banners in our hands saying that's not my constitution. I believe that moment planted this little seed inside of me, that it was necessary to occupy those decision-making spaces in Congress. Because if there weren't political actors in Congress, who make decisions that echo the demands of the citizens and the youth for more rights, because if not, there's no use in protesting outside if there's nobody inside who listens

Anat Shenker-Osorio

At this time, the Dominican Republic had a majority conservative government. The Dominican Liberation Party had been in power since 2004. In late 2016, a major scandal broke: A Brazilian construction company called Odebrecht paid millions of dollars in bribes to various countries in Africa and Latin America for special construction contracts. The Dominican Republic was one of

the highest-paid countries on that list. This fueled distrust in the government. People were getting fed up with the corruption on display among their leaders.

One of the people helping make sense of this corruption and formulate effective pushback to it was Virginia Antares Rodriguez, Jose Horacio's sister.

Virginia :

The country was at the end of a two-year period of a very strong process of mobilization, fighting against corruption and impunity in the most massive mobilizations ever seen in the Dominican Republic. A movement that was called the Green March of hope to end impunity erupted on the release of the Odebrecht scandal... And that, let's say, that's the straw that broke the camel's back and started a process of mobilization in which we also participated very actively. It was very intense and legitimized this mobilization before the government and the politicians. Taking into consideration that this was a government that had been in power for practically 20 years, with a small interruption, it was an increasingly authoritarian government. So, within this context, we also felt that there was an opportunity to channel that discontentment and the demand by the people to see a political that was quite different from the one of corrupted politicians that had been in government for so many years.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Virginia and Jose Horacio were among a cohort of activists ready to force a change in Dominican politics, entering the electoral arena with a background in advocacy and organizing. They took part in the electoral process in 2016 as part of Opcion Democratica, a center-left political party founded a year earlier, but their candidate lost.

Virginia :

It was a very important experience for us because we entered the process from a very naive place, thinking that since our platform was the best, it would generate turnout. And that wasn't true, as much for our limited ability to communicate our proposals and as for our limited ability to deal with electoral campaign logistics, and everything that they entail. It was a very rough experience, and I would say a little traumatic. But it helped us to learn, to reflect and say it's OK to understand the real obstacles and barriers, to realize how this dynamic works, and to acknowledge what we needed to do in order to get greater receptivity from voters.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

This only made them and their colleagues and allies more insistent on creating a campaign of their own, on their own terms with a clear, resonant message and corresponding strategy as positive and morally-grounded as their ideals. Jose Horacio - who had previously been Secretary General of Opcion Democratica would become their candidate.

Virginia - marrying theoretical understanding with practical guidance, including in crafting key messaging, would serve as a key advisor.

And Franiel - Long steeped in politics and deeply knowledgeable about social media, would manage the broader team.

In 2020, Opcion Democratica merged with Alianza Pais. Franiel joined this newly merged party and saw the incredible promise of Jose Horacio as a candidate.

Franiel:

We wanted to identify and support candidates who had the minimum we deemed necessary for a good candidate. This was a commitment to transparency, a commitment with a set of ideas that we had, which went from the commitment to deepen the democratic model we have, to the serious commitment to preserve the environment. Transparency not only in campaigning but also with the public sector, in the fight against corruption, the matter that we are here to fight for rights, for example women's rights. And when I found out that Jose Horacio had announced his candidacy, I said, that's the campaign space where we need to participate,

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Jose Horacio radio ad defined Buena Política

Campaign Ad

Anat Shenker-Osorio

This ad says good politics sums up the ideas and values that unite us, because those of us who believe in good politics want our votes to equal the good use of what is public, someone who goes into power to protect our interests. This candidacy is an invitation to begin a transition of our citizens and of our country toward good politics that educate that, purify, that add up that deliver and make people deliver on our laws. Together we're going to demonstrate that good politics can win in our country. Vote Jose Horacio, Alianza Pais, for Congress.

Jose Horacio announced his candidacy in May of 2019 for a May 2020 election. In the Dominican Republic a year is a very long lead time. Part of the reason for that advanced notice was because from the very beginning, his campaign knew they wanted to set themselves apart from the pay to play politics and endemic to the Dominican Republic.

Virginia :

It was because we specifically knew that in order to build this kind of project, without the structure and the machinery of the major parties or the resources of the other big parties, we needed time, and we needed to go out with an advantage. We'll go out with an advantage against the other candidates.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

But while Jose Horacio was well-liked by those who knew him, he was not well known.

Jose Horacio's team didn't have the same resources or backgrounds as their competitors, but also people in the Dominican Republic were sick of the big time political machines in order to play against the major parties they couldn't just try and level the playing field. They had to play on completely different terrain.

Virginia :

We clearly knew that we had to differentiate ourselves from them, from the opposition, from the politically dominant forces that had all the resources available in the world; not only at the level of party structure but also at the level of financial resources. So, if traditional politicians compete in the field of massive publicity, we needed to find an alternative. First, because we didn't have the resources to win in that field. And second, because that was the idea. In other words, if you have the resources, it means that you are competing with others that are doing the same. Also, there was a rejection, people rejected the excessive spending, the publicity that fills up the streets and the advertising panels. Then, how do we compete against that?

Anat Shenker-Osorio

I first met Virginia and learned of this landmark campaign during a training I did on principles of persuasion for Latin American activists, hosted by Amnesty International.

Virginia :

There, Anat, you also were very influential for us, because I discovered you on the Internet, as I mentioned it to you. And when I read part of your guides and your approach to affirmative communications, I connected them with a lot of experiences that social movements. It confirmed several reflections that I had, and it gave us light. I even remember after months when I found the guide, a few days after I talked to José Horacio, when I was in Turkey, and told him: José Horacio, I found a fabulous guide that will help us with the campaign. We have to see how we adapt it into Spanish and to the Dominican context, but that's the way.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

I like to joke that I can summarize default left wing messages in three sentences: (1) Boy, have I got a problem for you. (2) This is the Titanic, would you like to buy a ticket. And (3) We're the losing team, we lost recently, so you should join us. Most people aren't out looking for new problems, shopping for tickets to board a disaster or looking to join the losing team. Over and over what we find in message testing, and thus the first principle laid out in that guide is to start off your message by evoking a higher order value, by saying what you're for. In short - if you want people to come to your cause, you need to be attractive.

Virginia and her colleagues took this idea very much to heart in settling upon an overarching campaign slogan and brand.

They started out with the idea of Nueva Política, New Politics, to highlight their fresh entrance on the scene and draw an implicit contrast to the old guard.

But another member of the campaign team, Camila, raised the point that new politics doesn't necessarily mean better politics. Fresh faces could still engage in the same corrupt, self-serving tactics. Indeed, one of the core challenges this - and any campaign faces - is cynicism. A completely justified feeling from voters that the system is broken, everything and everyone in it already is or will rapidly become corrupt. And so, instead of the value-neutral proposition of new politics, they came up with a different concept.

Here's Jose Horacio

Jose :

And at the beginning, the concept of new politics was more developed, and there was another candidate of my party running for mayor of our capitol district who talked about new politics. But we understood that the concept of new politics was not enough because being new does not mean being good. We have had new political experiences that were negative. Then, we decided that Good Politics was better aligned with what we wanted to express. The concept of good politics was key because it always generated a lot of attention. Every time I participated in the media, in an interview, they asked me what is good politics, what is it about? And we could demonstrate with content, with concrete actions from our campaign.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Soon, Buena Politica became a talking point. Something that differentiated them, served as an implied critique of others, and set the foundation to characterize their governing agenda. They laid this out in an ad called Vamos Junt@s, Let's Go Together.

Vamos Junt@s:

En el 2003 agarré mi primera pancarta junto a Ya ta' Bueno. Demostrando que la juventud no es indiferente. Las tomé por Los Haitises y Loma Miranda. Por el 4%. Para rechazar indultos a corruptos. Marché por los derechos de las mujeres. Marché de verde por el fin de la impunidad, y en cada lucha nos hemos encontrado. Frente al congreso o al palacio nacional. En el Parque Independencia exigiendo justicia fiscal o en la Plaza de la Bandera defendiendo la democracia. La justicia. Y la dignidad del pueblo dominicano. Todas esas luchas las traigo conmigo y ha llegado el momento de llevarlas a donde se toman las decisiones. ¡Sembremos juntos en el congreso la Buena Política!

Anat Shenker-Osorio

In this ad, we see a series of Dominicans from all walks of life. Young and old, men and women, of every color and background. Each hands the other a flowering plant, symbolizing life, growth and beauty, while they detail Jose Horacio's background and the principles and passion that led him to run for office. The ad ends by declaring, "together, let's plant La Buena Politica in Congress." All of the campaign materials brought the idea of Buena Politica to the fore as both slogan and approach to what to prioritize once in office.

Jose :

Number one was human rights, our defense and our commitment to defend, with the protection of human rights and the role that the State has to guarantee them. In second place, there was the fight against corruption, an independent judiciary that is necessary for corruption to be punished. And then, one of the things that makes politics most disenchanting in our society is its opacity, its lack of transparency. That is one of the things for which most people reject politicians in the Dominican Republic.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

In a country where politicians handed out tributes to curry favor with voters, Jose Horacio flipped the script on fundraising and solicited contributions from the public. And then, the team leaned even farther into this approach novel to Dominican politics: they publicized where funds came from and how each peso got spent.

Jose :

Then we say, we are going to demonstrate with specific actions, our commitment to transparency. And we began to raise funds from citizens. Something that is not usually done here. And we are going to have a publication, on our social networks every month about what we raised and how we spend it. Then it will be the first public example that differentiates us from the rest of the candidates of bad politics. Good politics is transparent, good politics is accountable.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

It also solved an inherent messaging problem: How do you have a decidedly positive message, a campaign rooted in your values and amplifying your beliefs, while also cutting straight to the heart of the political problem of the day: rampant corruption.

Virginia, Jose Horacio and Franiel took lessons from their time as activists to spread this affirmative message that served as a balm for and rebuke to what most turned voters off to politics.

Virginia :

We were very aware of that, that we wanted a positive and purposeful campaign in addition to a happy tone and a good vibes tone because we also came from a process of reflection from activism.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

The campaign took inspiration from movements like the Marcha Verde, or Green March, that used positive messaging. The campaign used an ethos of joyful revelry and visible iconography to engage and inspire.

Virginia :

The marches were like a carnival. We used balloons, we used roses in the events we organized, it was very symbolic. People want to be part of things that are, that can be enjoyed, that are pleasant, where you can go with your family, colorful, etc. and, and works better. I mean, it's more fun and then, it works better.

We held a clean-up day, which was very beautiful, and the clean-up day is great. People say, "Oh, what are these folks up to? Cleaning, how wonderful!" And, in addition, we connected it at the metaphoric level because we were saying, "we're cleaning this area, the same way we're going to clean up Congress, the same way we're going to clean up politics. Another great activity we did was a caravan on bicycles. One central element of bad politics in the Dominican

Republic are these really expensive caravans, where so much money is wasted, it's all about showmanship, and it creates so much waste. Those caravans are like a symbol of these extravagant campaigns that people, especially the middle class, really disprove of. So, we did an alternative version on bikes, which is environmentally friendly, it doesn't show off, it doesn't dirty anything up. And we also invited people to come and paint a group mural. It was so pretty, really colorful, So, I think that this kickoff really set the tone that we wanted the campaign to have, and it was really positive.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

In addition to these events, the campaign employed face to face conversations, a form of what is commonly called relational organizing, where you get people together based on the relationships that they already have in their lives and have your message snowball out from there. Here's Franiel.

Franiel: ([19:39](#))

Short time. We needed to make sure people knew him because if in a campaign, people don't know you, they won't vote for you. We got into a simple face-to-face approach, which was that we met in small groups. We selected people from our circle and asked them to organize people who we understood could be sympathetic to the cause or to organize a meeting with their neighbor, their brothers, their uncle, their friends, their coworkers, that is the people they were interacting with. We organized meetings in which there were three people, but there were others were 50 or 40 or 30. And through those encounters, we were able to have an average three to four meetings per week.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

And then COVID hit. And they adopted,

Franiel:

What are we going to do when the pandemic strikes, everything falls apart. But luckily, and unlike other candidates, we had a whole digital platform running, which allowed us to use it to our advantage, really, compared to other candidacies, the strategic use of social media, how we put out the content, how we played with the aesthetics and also with the assistance of digital advertising helped us a lot, be able to stand out from the rest.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

And the campaign achieved its mission. People join the cause in the spirit of buena politica. One great example is the song el ritmo de buena policia or the rhythm of buena politica, which was written by Xiomara Fortuna for the campaign.

el ritmo de buena policia

Anat Shenker-Osorio

But even if more people were coming to recognize Jose Horacio, they still needed to understand what he stood for. And they did this by educating potential voters on all aspects of politics.

Franiel:

Standing out in that maelstrom was very difficult ... The approach that we took was to do a pedagogical campaign instead of telling people look, I'm so-and-so and vote for me. Rather, what we did was: concentrate on telling people what Congress was. What a congressman does. What the duties, the obligations of a congressman are. And then through that, that was like the hook for people to pay attention to us. When people were paying attention we would say to them, "Ah, well, look, I want to be a representative to do this and this. And if you like that, support me."

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Symbolism was a huge part of transmitting their message, viral moments that set them apart visually and hearkened back to the point of their campaign to make a better future for all through politics. In the Dominican Republic, lawmakers, handout funds at their discretion to their constituents. This can be anything from giving out refrigerators on mother's day to baskets around Christmas time, Dominican's referred to these political patronage handouts, derisively as "barrilito" or little barrel and "cofrecito" or little coffer. And so the campaign came up with an ingenious media savvy way to show, not tell they were smashing corruption.

Virginia :

It occurred to us to take a literal barrel, one of those where alcohol and rum are aged, and put it in front of the congress, and destroy it. And that act, logistically for a campaign, was very simple. However, for example, that was the first time we achieved media coverage, because it was very difficult to achieve media coverage for a minority party. We got a lot of impact on the networks. And I think that's why. Due to the strength that this symbol of the people has, seeing that barrel and them breaking that barrel, attracted a lot of attention.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

And finally election day was approaching and the team knew that in the Dominican Republic, getting the most votes, wasn't actually enough to win office.

Virginia :

we also knew from the experience of 2016 that in the Dominican Republic you can win with votes. These are elections, but if you do not have people at the polling stations at the moment of the count, who are there defending your votes, you did nothing, because the culture is that the delegates of the majority parties steal them. They literally tell you, Ay, that little party got so many votes, but we are not going to let that vote go to waste. Half for you and half for me. It works like that in the Dominican Republic. And we knew it. And we also said that we were not going to make a lot of campaign effort to win votes, and that on election day they won't count

them. So, from the beginning, we proposed that we had to have an army of delegates defending our votes on election day.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

This political reality was bad enough, but then things took a turn for the worse. Suddenly for the first time ever in the country's democratic history, the government suspended the municipal elections scheduled to take place before the congressional races, in which Jose Horacio was running. The team had gone to various polling places at 5:00 AM that day. And at 10:00 AM, the president of the central electoral board went on live television to announce that the elections could not proceed. The electronic voting machines in use for the first time weren't working.

Virginia :

So, that created a scenario of total uncertainty about the democratic future of the country. And for us, it was a challenge, an obstacle. That was something unexpected because all along we were waiting for the municipal elections to pass, so that people would put their full attention on the congressional race. And therefore, we would begin to see more support for the campaign...

Anat Shenker-Osorio

And even though this was a roadblock in buena politica fashion, the campaign actually turned the situation to their advantage.

Virginia :

That created a political crisis that I feel ended up to a certain point benefiting the campaign because we were part of the protest that took place since that first night.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

The night the suspension of the municipal election was announced, the team went to the Plaza de la Bandera, a central square in the capitol city, in front of the Central Electoral Committee (Junta Central Electoral) to protest. It started out the first night as around 50 to 100 people, and the next night it doubled, and the next after that, and so on.

Virginia :

Until there came a point at the end of that week, that those protests became massive, massive, massive, and we were there from day one. José Horacio was there, and there an ambience was generated. On the one hand, they saw him take up a certain leadership, and also it created the conditions for more people to pay attention to what was going on in the electoral reality and to take part in the initiative that we put together later, the Guardians of Democracy.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

As mentioned, simply getting more votes isn't how you win elections in the Dominican Republic. The major parties relied upon a network of poll watchers paid to oversee the count in each site and contest any attempts to get rid of or swap votes. But Jose Horacio's campaign didn't have the funds to pay people to do this and, anyway, this would undermine their entire approach of

doing away with patronage politics. And so they recruited volunteers - by the hundreds - to serve as election observers.

They named them Guardianes de la Democracia, Guardians of Democracy, and once again availed themselves of the power of symbols, outfitting these volunteers in t-shirts modeled on the superheroes Guardians of the Galaxy.

The Guardianes spent two full weeks, over long days, at the election center (Junta Central del distrito) for the district where all of the votes are sent and reviewed for any errors. And it was an incredible experience because they defended every vote - not just the ones for their candidate - and earned the respect of the entire electoral commission (Junta Central Electoral) and the opposition parties.

And, once again, the Guardianes showed Buena Politica to be far more than a campaign slogan; it was a deep commitment to the democratic process itself.

Virginia :

The initiative of the guardians of democracy generated a sense of identity that gives us a lot of strength. In other words, people felt part of something important and something valuable and that they were on the side of an army in defense of democracy. It really was that, and at the time that was what people were looking for. And our expectation is to multiply that initiative and effort for the next election.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

And then finally in July of 2020, Jose Horacio became a Diputado, a member of the lower house of the Dominican legislature from the first constituency of the capital city. And it got emotional.

Jose:

Wow! For me, what I am most proud of is the team that was built. It was an extraordinary team. And if this teamwork was not done, we would not have been able to achieve the results we achieved. The commitment, the devotion, the dedication with which so many people took on this project makes me feel extremely proud. I believe that Good Politics is a collective action, it is not an individual action. And to have built a group of so many committed, dedicated, selfless people, willing to dedicate time and resources to a cause that transcends us, makes me unbelievably proud. And that is rare in the Dominican Republic. There is no such custom. And the fact that we could have done that in the Dominican Republic makes me feel extremely proud.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

This was an entirely improbable win, not just for this one campaign, but really for appending, how electoral races are run in the Dominican Republic. Every member of the team echoed that the greatest achievement of the campaign wasn't the win. It was the way the campaign was run

Virginia :

And from the beginning, we spoke very consciously that, that we knew that losing was a possibility. And if we lost, we lost, but we felt that it was time to make that bet, to give ourselves

that opportunity and give the country that opportunity... And in fact, that was also important because nobody believed that it was possible to win. Nobody who knew about politics, nobody who was in politics, nobody who does analysis and knows the Dominican political history was going to tell you that a minority party in the Dominican political culture, which is so clientelistic. based on the strength of party structures, which steal votes, etc. was going to win. A minority party had no chance, and in fact in 20 years a minority party had not won a seat except in alliance with a majority party. So, we knew that it was very difficult, that officially it couldn't be done, etc. But we also knew within ourselves that there was a chance and that we had to give it our all.

Franiel:

The victory of this campaign is still undeniable. And I think I told José Horacio, when we saw each other about 9 or 8 in the morning, it was the first moment we met that day, and I told him: I remember saying that verbatim, “whatever the results, we won.” We had already won because we had run a campaign the way we wanted, how we felt comfortable. And it had excited a ton of people.

Anat Shenker-Osorio

Words to Win by is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Grace Lynch, Britany Martinez and Sundus Hassan Nooli with editorial support from Ale Tejada, Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Liz Brown, Anthony Torres, and Jillian Marcells. Our executive producers are Jenny Kaplan and me, Anat Shenker-Osorio. Our theme music is written by T.R. Richie, produced and arranged by Dan Leon. Special thanks to Chari Velazquez for the translation. Thanks to Sue Ariza, Jerry Diaz, and Danny Báez for their voiceover talent . If your words don't spread, they don't work, so please let others know and rate and review the show wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Theme Song:

A song is somewhere to begin to search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done and a song, it's somewhere to begin.

Ad:

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us how a microscopic virus could upend our lives. There is so much out there that we need to understand, but for every threat, there are heroes working at the edges of science and policy to protect us. I'm Dr. Abdulla, former Detroit health director and host of crooked media's America sector. Every episode I talked to the doctors, scientists, culture makers, and policy leaders, or working out new ways to protect us against our biggest threats, new episodes of America dissected every Tuesday, listen on Odyssey, apple podcast, or wherever you get your podcast.