

Mexican press coverage of the US primaries (Part I)



George Bush campaigning in Florida.

Bill Clinton in Chicago.



Main characteristics

During the period under study, 752 short articles appeared in nine Mexico city newspapers¹, with an average of 12 daily. This is low coverage for nine newspapers.

Coverage was widest following the most important primaries: New Hampshire (February 18), Maryland, Colorado (March 3), the 12 Super Tuesday states (March 10), and Michigan and Illinois (March 17). Newspaper coverage fell in the periods between important elections (see graph 1).

Excelsior, *La Jornada* and *El Día* provided the most extensive coverage, with 19% appearing as front page articles and 35% appearing in the international section inside the newspaper. Three quarters of the articles were written in the US, mainly in Washington D.C., and only 20% in Mexico. Forty per cent were written by Mexicans, the rest being issued by international agencies or were translations of articles in the foreign press. This analysis covers only the opinions expressed in the 309 articles written by Mexicans².

Views of the Mexican press

The most commonly quoted sources were the White House (George Bush), and the media. The Mexican press' views on the US primaries reflect uncertainty surrounding the elections as a whole. Forty-five per cent of news reports offered negative viewpoints, with only 14% giving favorable opinions and 41% offering informative or balanced reports (see graph 2).

The US political system

The idea persists that the US political system is something well-known. However, there is a tendency to question the US model of democracy (73% of the articles assessed it negatively). In this respect, *unomásuno* states that "most

¹ The following methodology was used for this study. Nine Mexico City newspapers were checked daily for articles on the election, which were then classified according to a code manual which defined the universe of variables. The results were then recorded on the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). The names of the newspapers follow, with the date they were founded. *El Universal* (1916), *Excelsior* (1917), *El Nacional* (1929), *El Día* (1962), *El Heraldo* (1965), *Unomásuno* (1977), *El Financiero* (1981), *La Jornada* (1984) and *El Economista* (1988).

² Mexican sources are defined as Mexican correspondents in the US, editorials, opinion pieces, special envoys, Notimex, newspaper reporters and cartoons.

Americans are unaware of how democracy works in their country" (February 19). *El Nacional* also criticized the democratic system, "when political power is in the hands of an elite.." (February 16), while *Excelsior* remarked that "US democracy is notably behind other political systems in the so-called post-industrial democracies" (March 12).

Some 59% of opinions regarding the electoral system are negative. The prevailing system of indirect voting is considered an obscure and inefficient way of electing the country's leaders. In the same article (March 12), *Excelsior* commented on the existence of institutional obstacles to electoral participation in the American system "caused by the way elections are organized" which has remained unchanged for many years.

Abstention was also criticized. According to *unomásuno*, "it is paradoxical that at a time when more Americans than ever have the right to vote, the country has the highest abstention rates of any of the industrialized nations" (February 20).

Nomination methods were accorded neutral treatment; 70% of all references were informative. It is noteworthy

that the three variables: the political system, the electoral system, and abstention, reflected a low positive image of the elections, which never rose above 10%.

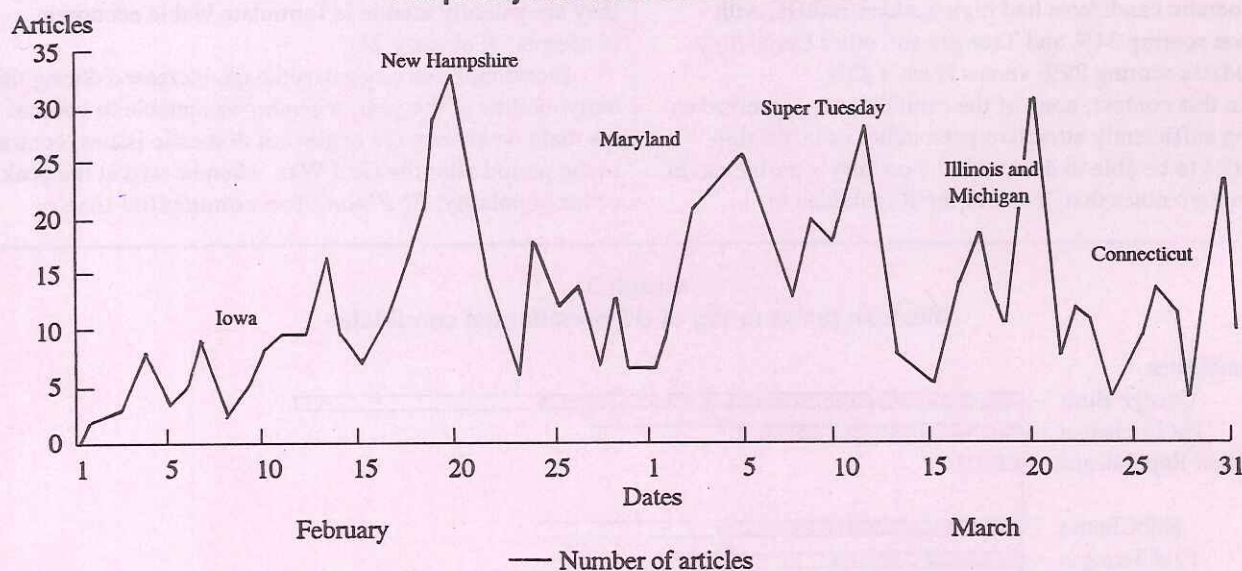
Candidates' image

The above perception extends to political parties as a whole as well as individual candidates. Negative opinions of the Republican party reached 45%, with 53% for Democrats. According to *El Día*, "there is deep division between party leaders and the rank and file, which is not restricted to Republicans alone and is even more pronounced among Democrats" (February 24).

The most frequently mentioned candidates were George Bush, Pat Buchanan, Paul Tsongas and Bill Clinton (see graph 3). Negative opinions tended to focus on George Bush, and to an even greater extent on Pat Buchanan, with figures of 45% and 60% respectively.

It is noteworthy that negative percentages were higher for the latter two candidates than for the Democrats, whose ratings wavered from neutral to negative. Negative ratings for other candidates, such as Tom Harkin, Bob Kerrey and

Graph 1
Frequency of articles on US elections



Source: Based on articles published in nine morning papers in Mexico City during February and March of 1992.

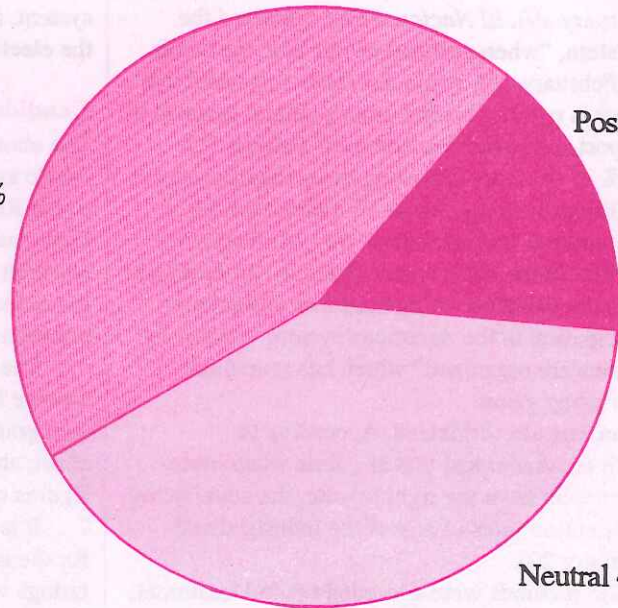
This is the first of a series of three articles analyzing Mexican press coverage of the 1992 US elections. The series will describe the various reactions of Mexican media to the results of the primaries held between February 1st and April 3rd.

Graph 2
Mexican press rating of US elections

Negative 46%

Positive 13%

Neutral 41%



Source: Based on articles published in nine morning papers in Mexico City during February and March of 1992.

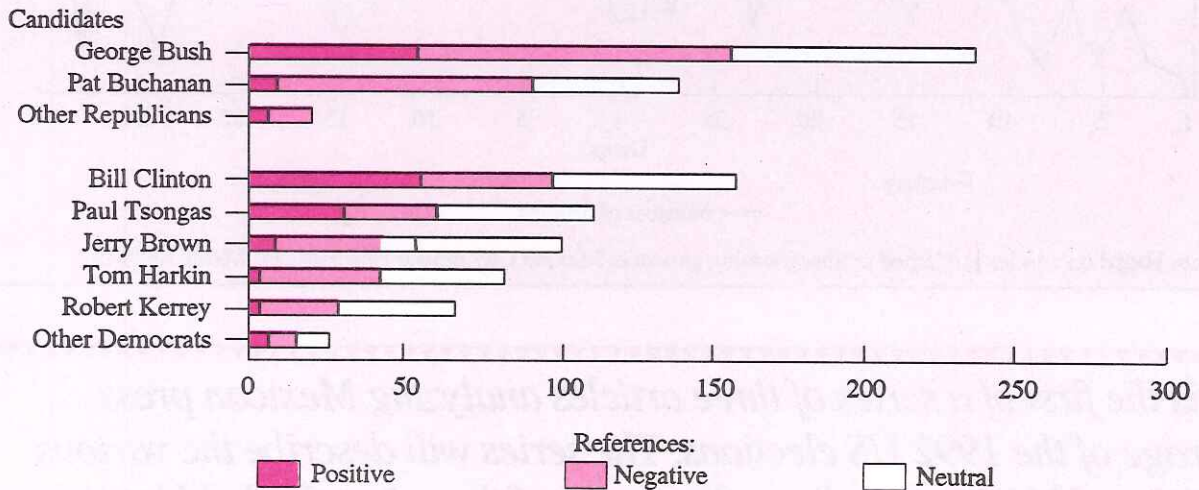
Jerry Brown reached approximately 40% (see graph 4). Conversely, Bill Clinton, Paul Tsongas and other Democratic candidates had high positive ratings, with Clinton scoring 34% and Tsongas and other Democratic candidates scoring 29% versus Bush's 23%.

In this context, none of the candidates is perceived as having sufficiently attractive personality or leadership qualities to be able to deal with the country's problems. *El Financiero* notes that "none of the Republican or

Democratic candidates exercises enough personal attraction to engage in a genuine political struggle, and they are patently unable to formulate viable economic platforms" (February 24).

President Bush's negative image increased during the early months of the year, when he was unable to conceal his main weakness, the neglect of domestic issues; contrary to the period after the Gulf War, when he was at the peak of his popularity. *El Financiero* commented that

Graph 3
Mexican press rating of US presidential candidates



Source: Based on articles published in nine morning papers in Mexico City during February and March of 1992.

"Bush's lack of decision and personal insecurity, reflecting a tendency to leave decision-making to his close advisers (...) are beginning to tarnish his image as a leader" (February 18).

In addition, according to the same source a month later (March 17), even though Bush had won all the primaries until then, "the persistent economic crisis, and even worse, Bush's inability to provide skeptical voters with viable solutions are making his re-election increasingly uncertain."

While the two Republican Party Candidates, Bush and Buchanan, held on, three Democrats, Harkin, Kerrey and Tsongas, withdrew from the presidential race, leaving Clinton and Brown. Clinton's successive victories and the withdrawal of three candidates meant that Clinton became a prime contender after Super Tuesday.

Clinton is regarded as the most likely Democratic candidate to be nominated, in spite of the scandals that have dogged his campaign. According to *La Jornada*, "at the moment, barring any more mistresses or illegal bank accounts, Bill Clinton will probably be the Democratic candidate to face George Bush" (March 28).

Clinton's defeat in the Connecticut and Vermont primaries against Brown, highlighted his vulnerability and persistent Democratic doubts regarding his ability to beat Bush. *El Financiero* noted that "Clinton is by no means the charismatic opponent with national support who could easily take power away from Bush" (March 17).

Negative and neutral ratings for Jerry Brown, Clinton's rival, were almost as high (90%) as for Kerrey and Harkin. Brown is not considered powerful enough to beat the Governor of Arkansas, although he has created problems for Clinton and may even be able to force a "negotiated" convention, where a third candidate for the nomination might emerge.

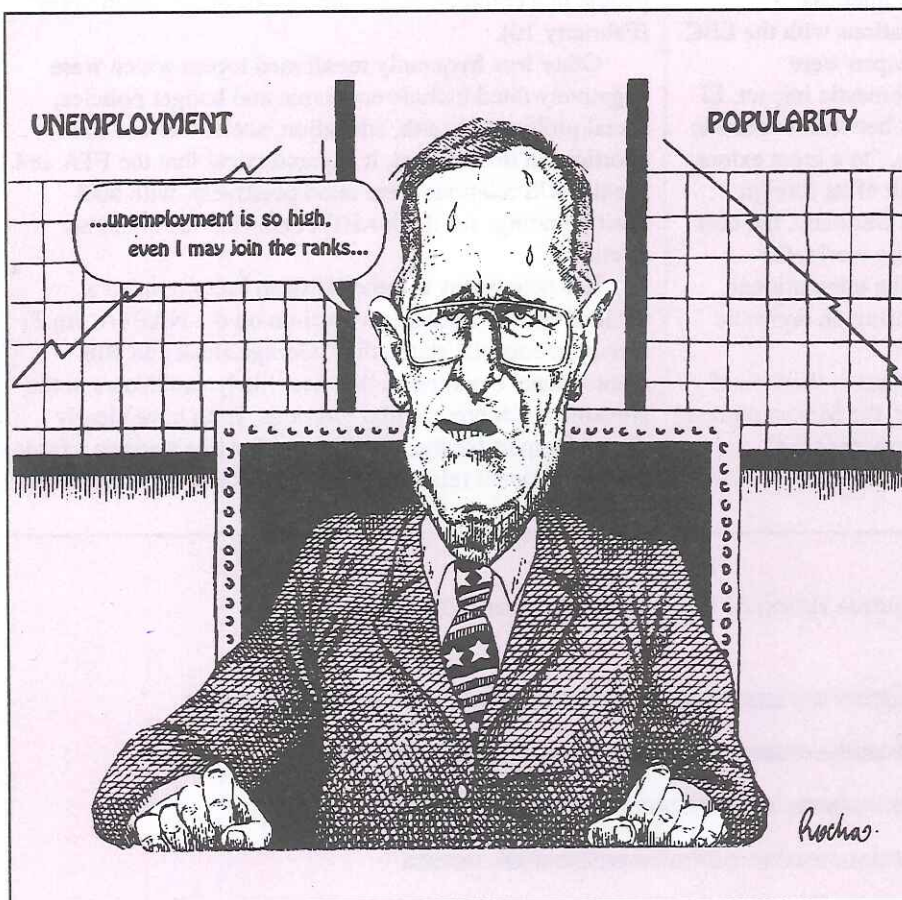
Subjects of debate

At the beginning of the primaries, debate focussed on the lengthy US

economic recession and foreign policy regarding possible international conflict, particularly in Iraq.

The outcome of the primaries and their geographical location has influenced the topics of debate. Until the end of March, the main subjects were the economy, trade policy and the FTA, which, except for the latter, the press reviewed negatively, with 84% negative ratings for the economy, 60% for trade policy and 46% for foreign policy (see graph 5).

The press has linked Bush's re-election prospects to the performance of the US economy. According to *La Jornada*, "US elections are generally won or lost according to the state of the economy. If the economy



According to *El Economista* (March 16), Buchanan was never regarded as a viable alternative because of his "isolationist, local and protectionist" brand of Conservative politics. Nonetheless, Buchanan's presence forced Bush to become more conservative, since "votes for Buchanan meant votes against Bush" (*El Financiero*, March 20).

On the other hand, *La Jornada* pointed out that "the president's policies were dubious, when a political nobody like Buchanan could take advantage of his weaknesses to obtain concessions for the right, even if this meant postponing programs and projects which might be essential to the recovery of the United States" (February 20).

improves (latest figures indicate that this is a possibility), then George Bush will probably win; if it continues to worsen, then Bill Clinton will probably win" (April 3). *El Financiero* thought that Bush would lose the elections as a result of "economic disenchantment following ten years of Reaganomics" (March 30).

The press has also linked Bush's economic policy to his bid for re-election. The media concludes that the state of the Union Message and the Budget for Fiscal 1993 were solely aimed to further Bush's electoral interests.

In the international context, US relations with the EEC countries, Iraq and Cuba, the CIE and Japan were perceived negatively because of their domestic impact. *El Nacional* established the following link between economic recession and the international situation, "to a great extent, problems in the US economy are a result of its foreign relations. Trade deficits with Japan and Germany, the cost of stationing troops in several parts of the world, the reduced competitiveness of US goods on the international market and other factors have had a bearing on domestic difficulties" (February 4).

Foreign policy becomes less important in the face of the country's economic crisis. However, the Mexican press has observed the candidates' inability to accept the challenge of US world leadership. *El Financiero*

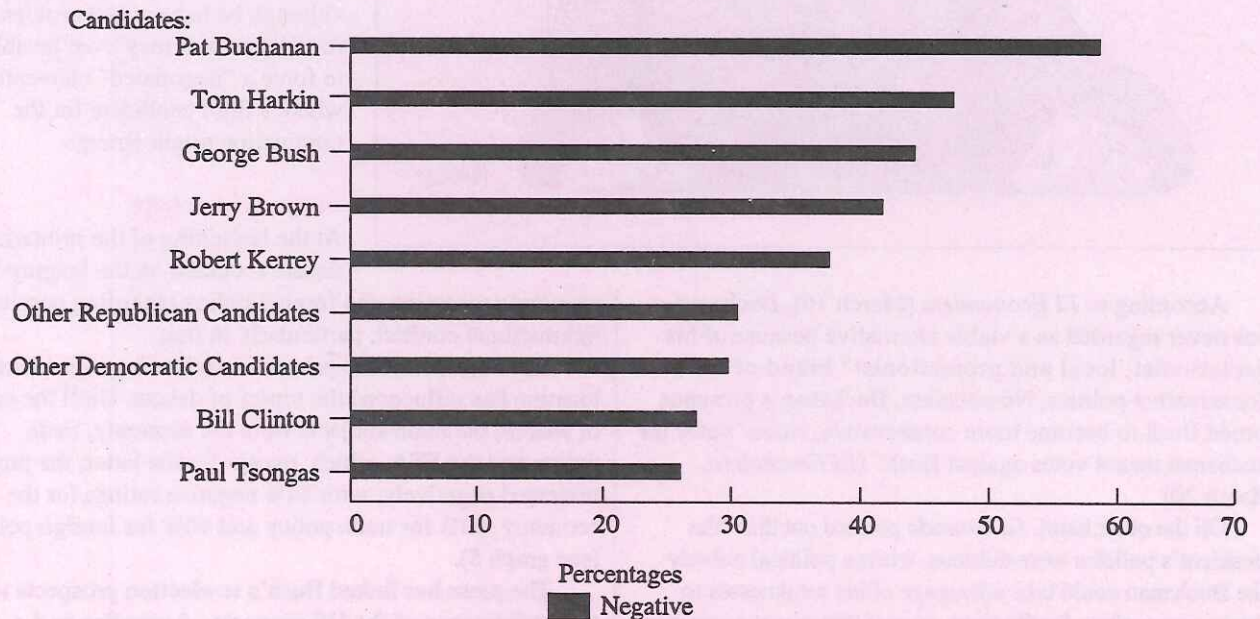
comments, "with the exception of Bush, candidates are extremely provincial, entirely lacking foreign policy credentials".

In spite of this, it has been suggested that Bush may attempt to create an international conflict to divert attention from unfavorable domestic issues surrounding his campaign. *La Jornada* comments on "the White House's intent to intervene anew against Saddam Hussein. They have not discarded the possibility of using the army as a successful foreign policy measure to reunite the American people in a common cause and as a mean to obtain votes" (February 10).

Other less frequently mentioned topics which were negatively rated include economic and budget policies, social problems, health, education, social welfare and abortion. In this context, it is paradoxical that the FTA and Mexico-US relations were rated positively, with 50% positive ratings for the NAFTA and 41% for bilateral relations.

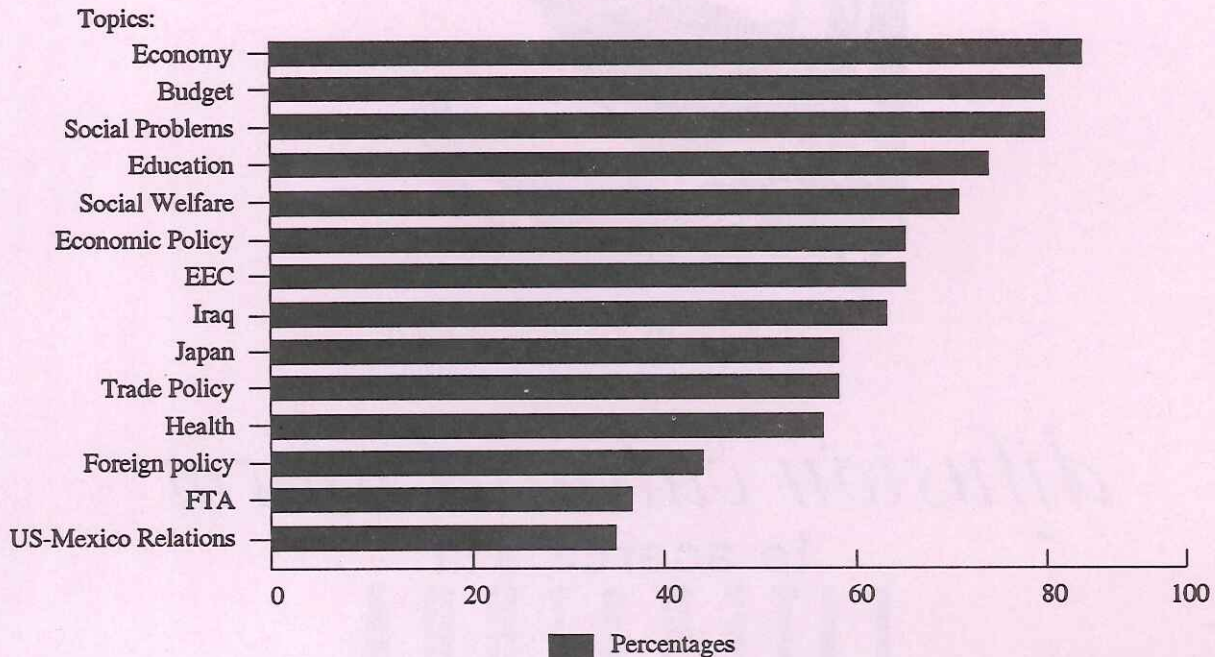
It is noteworthy that the Mexican Press' opinion is decided by the candidate's position on the NAFTA. An *El Nacional* editorial stated that "George Bush and Bill Clinton have emerged as the most likely candidates in the November US presidential elections. Both have clearly shown support for the NAFTA and for free trade as a basis for international relations. Their respective opponents, Pat

Graph 4
Negative rating of US presidential candidates



Source: Based on articles published in nine morning papers in Mexico City during February and March of 1992.

Graph 5
Election debate topics
(negative rating)



Source: Based on articles published in nine morning papers in Mexico City during February and March of 1992.

Buchanan and Jerry Brown, both protectionists, have fared badly in the primaries. Tom Harkin, the most radical Democratic opponent of the NAFTA, has already had to withdraw from the campaign" (March 22).

Conclusions

Mexican press coverage of the US elections has been patchy and inconsistent, increasing during important phases and decreasing in the interim. The press highlighted the primaries in New Hampshire and on Super Tuesday, March 10th, without providing similar coverage for later elections, during the period studied.

In general, there was a lack of awareness of the nature of the US political system and of the electoral process. The press has tended to take these elements for granted, and therefore thought it unnecessary to provide additional information on the subject. Coverage of the elections did not include an analysis of the key figures involved, or of the "hidden agenda". In this sense, there was an almost total lack of information on congressional re-election campaigns (except for the banking scandal involving hundreds of senators and representatives) or other important campaign topics such as education, health and abortion.

Another important point is that the Mexican weighs the elections and the candidates according to their position on the NAFTA. The media supports any candidate who favors the NAFTA while censuring its critics. The press was sympathetic to Bush and Clinton because of their stance on the NAFTA, judging them the virtual candidates in November.

However, some media did analyze the political process in more depth, discussing possible consequences for the US political system and the two party system as well. The case of the independent candidacy of Texas businessman, H. Ross Perot, began to be mentioned in the press towards the end of March.

In conclusion, Mexican press coverage of the elections will probably maintain its current level and gradually increase with the approach of the summer party conventions. However, it remains to be seen if quality of the coverage improves ❖

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