

Mexican press coverage of the US elections (Part II)

"Poor America, so far from God
and so close to Perot."¹

General features

The Mexican press published a total of 696 items on the US elections during the second quarter of 1992, an average of 53 items per week and a slight increase over the minimal coverage of the first quarter.²

During the period analyzed, primaries were held in New York, Wisconsin, and Kansas (April 7), Virginia (April 11), Utah (April 20), Pennsylvania (April 28), Indiana, North Carolina, Ohio, and the District of Columbia (May 5), West Virginia and Nebraska (May 12), Oregon and Washington (May 19), Kentucky and Arkansas (May 26), California, New Jersey, Alabama, Montana and New Mexico (June 2), and North Dakota (June 9).

Ross Perot's presence gave rise to greater coverage of the electoral process (see Graph 1), although articles on the subject still appeared only on inside pages of international sections.³ These were mainly translations of international press agency articles and photographs (69%), while another 16% included opinion pieces, editorials and caricatures with the remainder based on information from Mexican correspondents and staff reporters in the US.

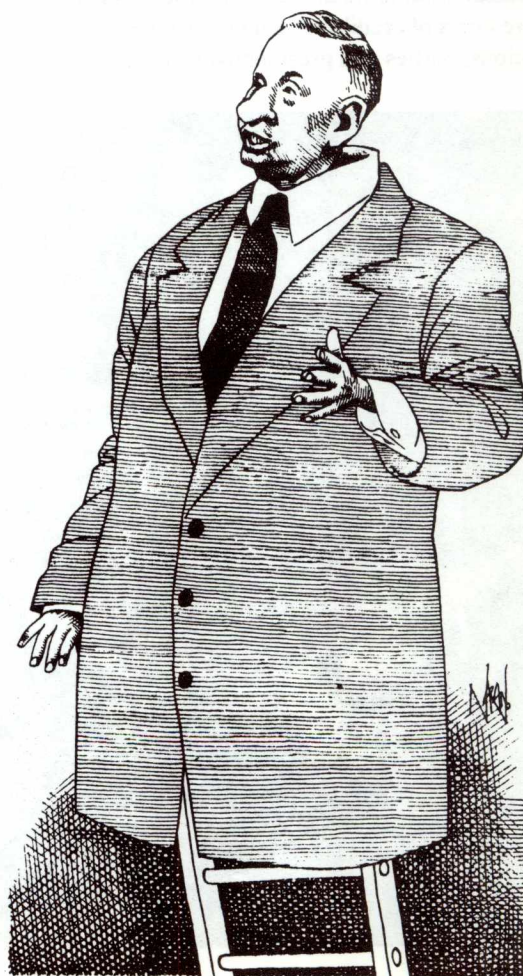
The present analysis is restricted to the 219 articles by Mexican journalists. Their opinions rated the elections and their context negatively in 52% of the articles and positively in only 8% (see Graph 2). *La Jornada*, *El Día*, and *Excelsior* published the largest number of articles by Mexican journalists.

¹ Rayuela column, *La Jornada*. June 10, 1992: 48.

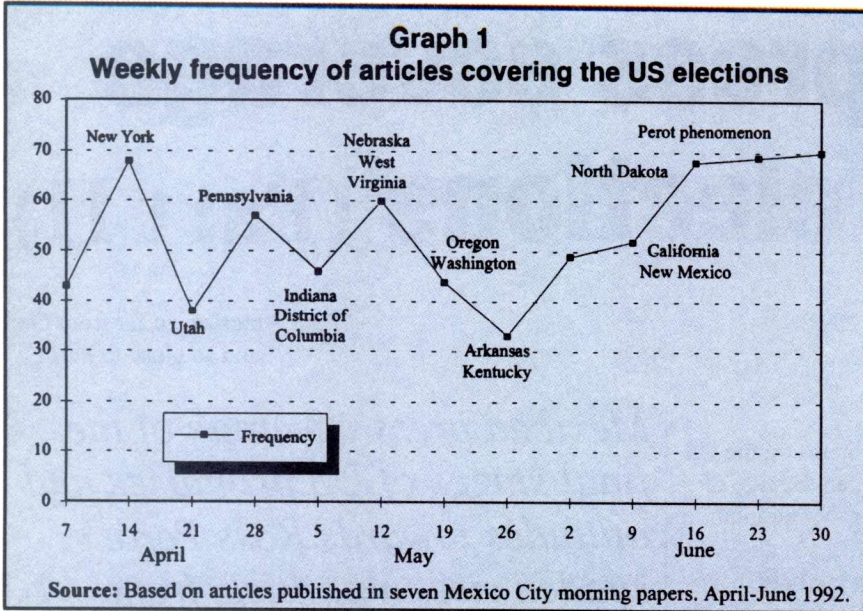
² The methodology adopted for this study is based on content analysis of news items appearing in seven Mexico City dailies. Items were classified according to 87 variables from a code manual and processed using the Statistical Program on Social Sciences (SPSS). Each variable for topics or persons includes a series of values classifying the tendency of the comments analyzed. Favorable opinions were given a positive value, criticisms were given a negative value, and a neutral value was given when the person or topic was mentioned without opinion. Newspapers analyzed included *El Día*, *El Heraldo de México*, *El Nacional*, *El Universal*, *Excelsior*, *La Jornada*, and *unomásuno*.

³ Two events explain the reduced election coverage. On the one hand, the outbreak of racial violence in Los Angeles on April 30 and on the other, the US Supreme Court decision regarding the Alvarez Machain case on June 15.

Mexican press coverage of the final stages of US primaries and attitudes towards Ross Perot's sudden rise in politics, from April to June 1992.



The huge Perot.



this is that negative ratings for the political system, public opinion, and absenteeism all exceeded 80%. Moreover, both the Republican and Democratic party were perceived negatively to a similar extent (see Graph 3).

Enriqueta Cabrera writes in *El Día* that "US citizens' dissatisfaction with domestic policies grew under George Bush, as political alternatives diminished ... political mobility is so limited and the Democrats' and Republicans' proposals so similar that US politics are more like a one-party system" (June 21: 14).

Candidates

Antipathy toward the political system spread to include candidates of both parties, with George Bush, Pat Buchanan, Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown all rated negatively. The press expressed its disapproval of candidates' efforts in the presidential race. Bush and Buchanan received the most negative comments,

Crisis in the US political system

In Mexican press opinion the US political system still faces a severe crisis of credibility among its citizens, affecting institutions, parties and presidential candidates. Proof of

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Texas billionaire Ross Perot shares his views, on the "Donahue" show in New York.



Reuter.

Ross Perot's independent candidacy became increasingly powerful.

while Bush even topped his party's negative ratings (see Graph 4).

A *La Jornada* editorial commented that "Bush represents those politicians trained during the Cold War who are more concerned with establishing America's control over the world than with petty domestic affairs" (May 31: 2).

While Clinton had more neutral ratings he was also perceived negatively. Enriqueta Cabrera points out that "What some have called Bill Clinton's charisma has not been translated into electoral support. Before he began competing for the Democratic nomination, Clinton was considered a background figure. After that, he devoted himself to deflecting accusations about his personal life. Since then, he seems to have had neither the time nor the ability to explain his ideas" (*El Día*, June 21:14).

In an editorial note, *La Jornada* alluded to difficulties faced by both parties in choosing their candidates, regarding these as an expression of "a lack of serious

proposals to solve the country's persistent economic recession and the identity crisis it has suffered since the end of the Cold War in the absence of a clearly-defined enemy" (April 13: 2).

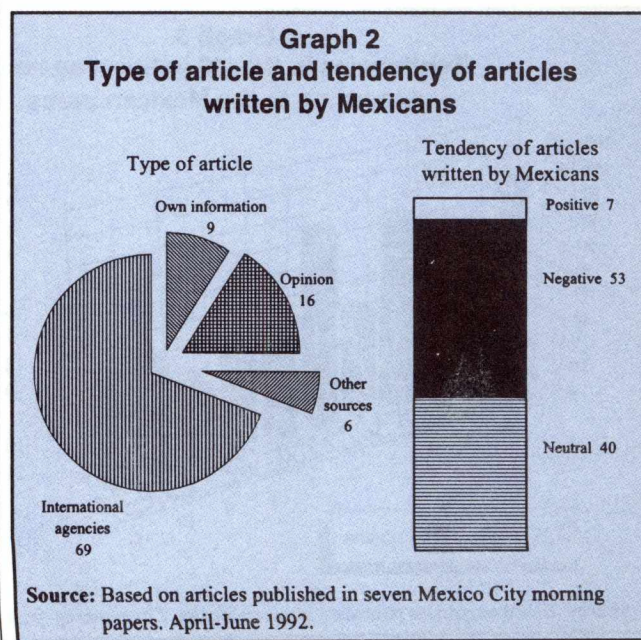
Nevertheless, as the nomination process advanced, so Ross Perot's independent candidacy became increasingly powerful, finding a surprising degree of support among voters. This was dubbed the "Perot phenomenon" by the Mexican press.

The Perot phenomenon

Perot's rise during this period placed him on a par with official candidates Bush and Clinton. Perot received considerable attention from the press, almost as much as Clinton and only less than Bush. However, two out of every five comments on Perot in the Mexican press were negative and only one in five was favorable.

How does one account for the Perot phenomenon? In the press' view, Perot's independent candidacy can be explained by the economic and political crisis. Other factors included the uninspiring Republican and Democratic candidates and the increasingly important role of the mass media. Lastly, there is the fact that the world has changed during the postwar period.

The reasons for Perot's rise can be found in general US voters' discontent with the crisis in their political institutions. The Los Angeles violence in early May was proof of this crisis and people's rejection of Bush. For Enrique Almandares, the message, "Go home, you lying hypocrite," aimed at Bush on his tour of Los Angeles only days before the end of the primaries, "seems to be what many citizens would like to say not only to Bush but also to



the Democratic pre-candidates and the political system with which they are becoming increasingly disenchanted" (*La Jornada*, June 2: 47).

This dissatisfaction influenced the electoral process and contributed to Perot's popularity. In the words of Jorge G. Castañeda, "Ross Perot is a presidential candidate to be reckoned with because he steals votes from both Bush and Bill Clinton, the right and the left, men and women, and rich and poor alike. He deserves to be taken seriously because he derives his strength from the heart of society and the US electorate" (*La Jornada*, June 8: 1).

The Mexican media's attitude towards Perot varied according to his stance on NAFTA and relations between Mexico and the US. Crossing opinions attributed to Ross Perot with important topics reveals that in most cases, attitudes toward Perot were negative or only slightly positive.⁴

Perot obtained the highest negative ratings in politics (30%), economics (27%), Mexico (27%), and slightly lower negative ratings in social problems and mass media (see Graph 5).

a) *Politics*. This is where Perot was most severely criticized by the Mexican press, which found fault with his authoritarian, conservative policies. According to an editorial in *La Jornada*, "...so far Perot, renowned for the extremely authoritarian and ultraconservative style he has imposed in his firms, has said little about his plans for government" (June 9: 2). Moreover, Perot is no stranger to politics and therefore an expert in using political influence.

b) *Economics*. Perot's political proposals were somewhat sketchy and included measures for a "dynamic,

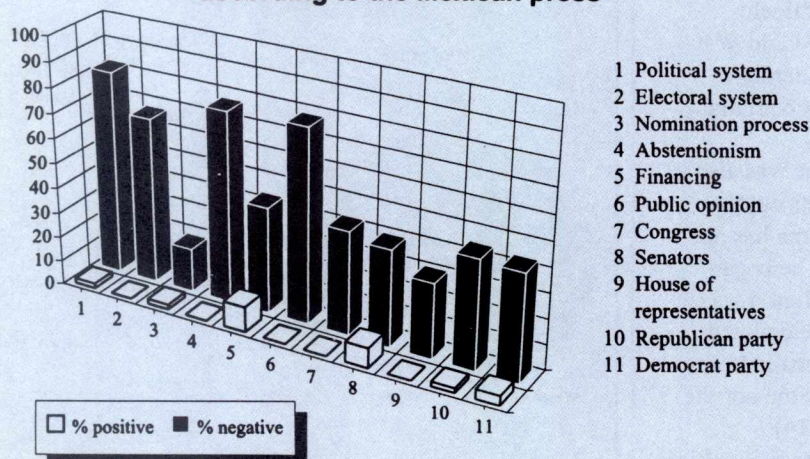
vigorous economy." Renward García Medrano notes that, while his aims were faultless, "Perot has given no clear indication of how he proposes to achieve them. In addition, some of these aims are contradictory, such as reducing the public deficit and reactivating employment" (*El Nacional*, June 21: 8). Perot was also criticized for his protectionist trade policies, summarized in the phrase "America first."

c) *Social problems*. Perot's vision of political problems is tinged with authoritarianism and conservative moral values. Renward García observed that Perot "tolerates abortion while demanding that young girls' parents be consulted and criticizing irresponsible pregnancies. He supports homosexuals' rights at the same time as he proposes to bar them from government or the armed forces" (*El Nacional*, June 1st: 8).

Similarly, the press noted that Perot's high-handed proposals for solving delinquency and drug-trafficking caused him severe problems with Hispanics and blacks. Adolfo Sánchez Rebolledo criticized his solutions as being part of a "technocratic, populist discourse proposing fantastic solutions for problems such as drug addiction, in the best James Bond tradition" (*La Jornada*, June 5: 11).

d) *Media*. His campaign was severely criticized since his popularity relied heavily on use of the media, especially television. Perot took advantage of live programs with phone-ins to gain support. Armando Avila Sotomayor wrote that, "it is a recognized fact that Perot owes his success to his excellent use of the press and other mass media. He has achieved a positive public image through triumphant press campaigns that have provided the basis for his strength. Perot pioneered the use of

Graph 3
Tendencies in the US political system,
according to the Mexican press



Source: Based on articles published in seven Mexico City morning papers. April-June 1992.

⁴ The Ross Perot variable was crossed with the most frequently occurring topics from the code manual. This produced a chart showing the number of times a positive mention of Perot coincided with a positive mention of the selected variable, e.g. the political system. This procedure was repeated for negative and neutral values of each significant variable. Results were grouped under five main areas: a) Politics, including the political system and nomination process, campaign financing and absenteeism; b) Economics, including domestic economy variables and US trade and budget policies; c) Social problems (minorities, racism, violence and civil rights); d) Mass media (newspapers, radio and TV); e) Mexico, including the country's internal situation, the Free Trade Agreement and relations between Mexico and the United States.

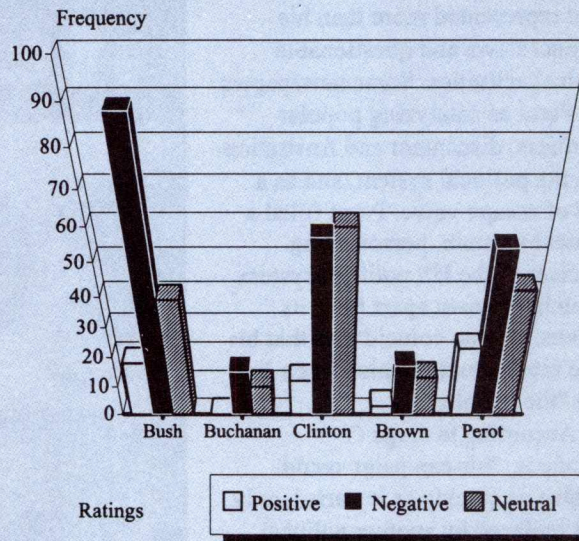
live appearances on popular programs, shifting the focus of messages and propaganda from mass outside rallies to people's living rooms, through newspapers, radio and TV" (*Excelsior*, June 11: 6).

e) *Mexico*. During his attempts to gain followers, Perot was criticized for changing his opinion on various campaign issues. However, his position on NAFTA remained unchanged from the outset, setting him apart from Bush and Clinton. Perot's stance on this matter influenced Mexican press attitude towards him. The possibility of Ross Perot's becoming president alarmed both the Mexican government and the press because of its potentially negative economic repercussions on Mexico. Perot was regarded as an obstacle to NAFTA. Jorge Bustamante, director of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, suggested "drawing up a contingency plan for Mexico in case the next US president is Ross Perot who is outspokenly against a free trade agreement with Canada and Mexico" (*El Heraldo de México*, June 8: 1). The Mexican stock market crash was even attributed to Perot's remarks against NAFTA.



A rising candidate talks to the media, getting ready for the race.

Graph 4
US presidential candidates' ratings



Source: Based on articles published in seven Mexico City morning papers. April-June 1992.

In short, the press rated Perot negatively. The combined results of all five areas show 68% of the results were negative and only 5% positive. However, a similar study on Bush and Clinton revealed that both candidates were perceived negatively, with 77% and 67% ratings respectively.

Lessons from the "Perot phenomenon"

The press saw Ross Perot's rise, which continued through the end of June, as a product of the overall situation in the US political system. Perot was not the solution to the country's problems, but neither were Bush or Clinton. Nevertheless, there was still speculation about the consequences of Perot being elected.

Enriqueta Cabrera argued, "If Perot maintains a strong position, this will cause a crisis in the two-party system not on election day but for government as well. If Perot were to win and be declared president, a possibility we must not discount, how could this anti-political, authoritarian man govern a two-party Congress that would probably be controlled by Democrats?"

"If Congress declared Bush president, which seems most likely, what would happen under an obviously weakened president who had to govern with a hostile Congress? And if Congress declared Clinton president, which seems unlikely, if, as currently predicted, he obtains the lowest number of votes, would he be able to govern, even with a majority in Congress, if the presidential figure were that clearly weakened?" (*El Día*, June 21: 16).

It was thought unlikely that Perot would reach November. However, this was not the issue. Perot represented more than his personal flaws and questionable political activities. Some newspapers saw Perot as catalyzing popular weariness, discontent and frustration with the political system, and as a kind of escape valve. Perot filled a political vacuum, personifying criticism of the US political system which had grown apart from its citizens. It is no coincidence that his basic intellectual premise was a link with "the people."

According to Jorge G. Castañeda, "his campaign could dissolve as quickly as it started, only to be replaced by another political expression of the same phenomenon: the tremendous political, social and economic crisis of a nation adrift" (*La Jornada*, June 8: 1).

Perot is proof that the American Dream is over. Adolfo Sánchez Rebolledo argues that, "Perot represented a reaction to the decline of the North American political class that reached its peak when the outside enemy, Soviet Communism, disappeared.

"The Perot case is part of the Fujimori syndrome sweeping the whole world: with professional politicians facing a credibility crisis, party systems facing a



At the Kentucky State House, where Perot presented his petitions as an independent presidential candidate.

representation crisis and finally the inability of institutionalized forms of representation, i.e. democracy, to confront the new reality of the modern world" (*La Jornada*, June 5: 11).

Perot is part of an anti-political, anti-establishment phenomenon sweeping American society, expressed in social movements, such as women's and ethnic minority groups, not represented in traditional politics but seeking political expression through presidential candidacies such as those of the former mayor of Irvine, California, Larry Agran or Ron Daniels and the formation of third parties which the system tends to discourage.

For these reasons, the US political system no longer answers the needs of important social groups other than WASPs. Therein lies the true dilemma facing the US political system and its presidential candidates **M**

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