

Mexican press coverage of the US elections (Part III)

General features

The period under analysis saw the publication of 282 articles written entirely by Mexicans in six Mexico City morning papers, an average of almost 35 per week. This figure reflects an increase in the Mexican press' interest in the US elections.¹

The period began in early July with a virtual tie between the three candidates, George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot; reversed by Ross Perot's decline and later withdrawal from his independent candidacy. Coverage increased substantially with Perot's withdrawal and the Democratic and Republican Party conventions. (Graph 1)

Most items appeared on front or other pages of the first section, as op-ed articles written in Mexico or by Mexican correspondents in the US. The papers carrying the most news

¹ The following methodology was used in this study: election news items were selected from six Mexico city morning dailies (*El Día*, *El Financiero*, *La Jornada*, *El Nacional*, *El Universal* and *unomásuno*) all written by Mexican sources. Not all items were tabulated. In view of the large number relating the elections to the North American Free Trade Agreement, it was stipulated that the principal subject had to be the elections for the article to be included in the analysis, and that the article did not mix Mexican writers with international news services. Information was processed according to a code manual listing 150 variables. The manual provided information on coverage and media perception of diverse election matters. After encoding, information was processed by the Statistical Program on Social Sciences (SPSS) package.

This is the third in a series of four articles on the US elections as perceived by the Mexican press. It aims to analyze Mexican press coverage of the Democratic and Republican Party conventions in July and August of 1992.

items were *La Jornada*, *El Universal*, and *El Financiero*, accounting for seven out of every ten articles published.

Opinion on the elections was equally divided between negative and neutral (Graph 2), the most frequently quoted sources being US media, the Executive and the Democratic Party.²

Views on the political system, parties and candidates

The Mexican press' image of the US political system as a whole is still negative. With the exception of the nomination process, remaining variables showed a high incidence of negative reference.³

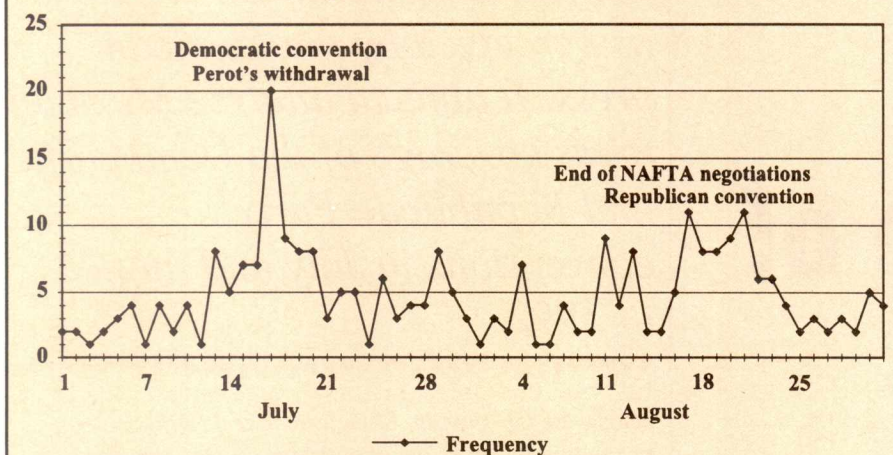
Content analysis of the main US political forces produced the following results:

- The period reflects a change in the Mexican press' view of the Democratic Party, now regarded neutrally, with a slightly positive bias, as opposed to the Republican Party which is viewed negatively.
- Similarly, the Democratic presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Clinton and Gore, are more favorably rated than their Republican counterparts, Bush and Quayle, with the latter having a negative effect on Bush's image.
- The Democratic convention and the election platform are also rated as being neutral, with a slight positive bias. Conversely, the Republican convention and platform are also rated neutral but with a slight negative

² To assess the Mexican media's position, their views on the candidates and campaign topics were rated as a) positive b) negative or c) neutral. Each variable for topics and candidates includes a series of values classifying the remarks analyzed, giving favorable opinions a positive value, criticism a negative value and a neutral value to remarks on the candidates or topics that did not express any particular opinion.

³ The Mexican press perceives general political variables as follows: (only the highest negative percentages shown) US political system, 76; absenteeism and public opinion, 73; electorate, 62, and electoral system, 56. Media perceptions of these aspects have remained unchanged since the beginning of the year. See the first article in this series in *Voices of Mexico* 20, July-September, 1992.

Graph 1
Frequency of articles on US elections



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers. July-August 1992.

bias, in spite of the favorable atmosphere produced by the end of the NAFTA negotiations between Mexico, the United States and Canada, only days before the beginning of the Republican convention. (Graph 3)

The Democratic convention

Ross Perot's withdrawal from the election campaign reinforced trends in media coverage of the Democratic convention. The press regarded Perot's move favorably since, "it helped clarify the US political process. We are left with just two alternatives for the forthcoming November elections that, regardless of their failings and the reactions they may provoke, have at least been clear and explicit about their aims and programs."⁴ (*La Jornada*, July 17:1)

As previously mentioned, the press shifted its opinion of the Democrats and their candidates. The Democratic convention was seen as a move by the formerly "Liberal" party toward the center and moderation, considerably removed from the position that was responsible for its defeats in the 80s and closer to the Republican Party.

Emilio Zebadúa saw Clinton's nomination as a long-awaited triumph of the Democratic Leadership Council: "It was a triumph of Conservatives over Liberals (Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis and Mario Cuomo) and Progressives (Jesse Jackson). They finally managed to be at the center of the US political spectrum, after trying for

⁴ During this period, Perot was regarded extremely negatively by the Mexican press, with 67% of all articles rating him negatively and 28% neutrally. For a detailed analysis of the Mexican press' initial view of Perot's candidacy and of his importance for the US political system, see the second article in this series in *Voices of Mexico* 21, October-December 1992.

almost a decade. There is hardly anything left of the party as it was." (*La Jornada*, July 15:39)

El Universal's correspondent, José Carreño Figueras, wrote that, "in a convention carefully designed to avoid any hint of disorganization or conflict, Clinton and his advisers managed to present a "rejuvenated" Democratic Party, with a veneer of unity and aimed at the middle class, without formally excluding any social group." (International Section, July 20:1)

The Clinton-Gore ticket was seen as a "new option for Americans" that would capitalize on the US domestic economic situation and Bush's weakness both within the country and

abroad. (María Gallo, *El Financiero*, July 31:48)

Both are regarded as moderates and part of a "new generation" that has broken with the tradition of choosing a running-mate to contrast with the candidate. (Mauricio Rossell, *El Universal*, July 28:1F)

The Democratic Party, Clinton and his proposals would no longer represent the old sectors on which the New Deal was based, but they had still to win the support of moderate conservatives, big business and Reagan Democrats.

For David Brooks and Jim Cason, *La Jornada* correspondents, "the political risks for Clinton are clear. Demobilizing the trade union and civil rights bases that meant a huge number of votes for Democrats in the past, to court the "center" could be their downfall," but "Clinton's



The consequences of Ross Perot's candidacy, the development of Bill Clinton's campaign and George Bush's poor performance led the Mexican press to view Clinton differently.

team think they can afford to neglect the party bases they are demobilizing since they know they have no option but to vote for the Democrats. Their motto is unity against Bush at all costs, i.e. not necessarily everyone on Clinton's side." (July 26:47)

The economy was an important topic for the Mexican press. For Rosalba Carrasco and Francisco Hernández, "Democrats' concern for the growth and creation of jobs is no minor issue. It focuses on what is probably one of the most important aspects of the recent US economic situation." (*La Jornada*, July 20:37)

La Jornada correspondents, David Brooks and Michael Fleshman, pointed out that in Clinton's acceptance speech, "the subject of Blacks, Hispanics, Mexico and Latin America was conspicuously absent." (July 17:45)

Apart from topics concerning Mexico, to be analyzed in the last part of this series, the Mexican press focussed on Bill Clinton's remarks on the economy, employment, economic, budget and trade policies, the environment, health, education and foreign policy, ignoring his personal affairs.

The Republican convention

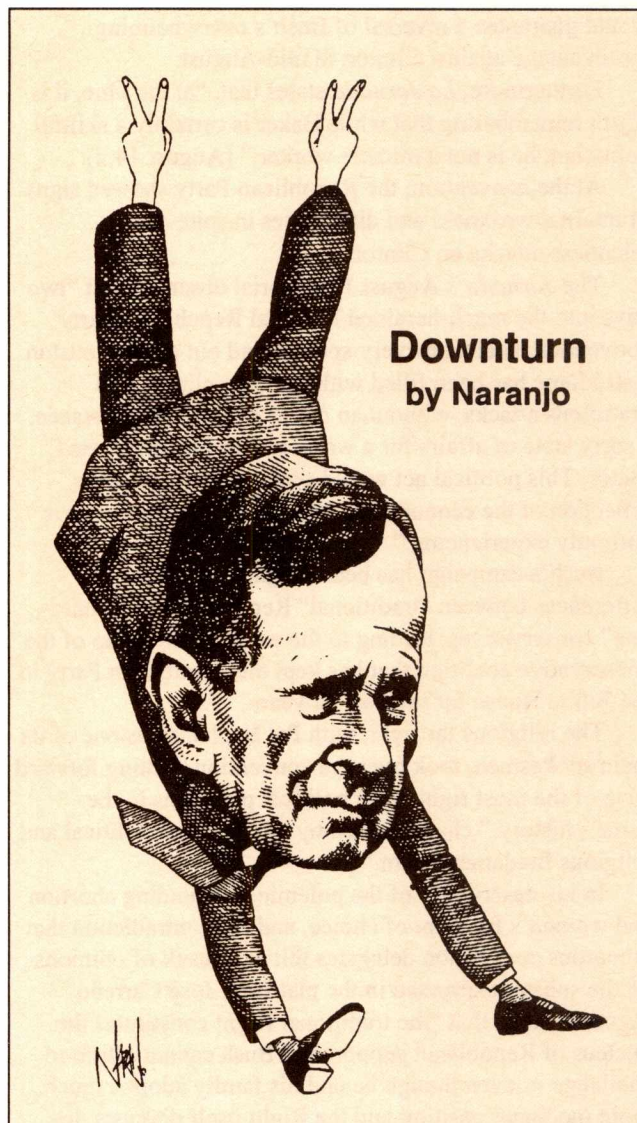
Clinton's broad lead in the surveys was the basis of the Republican Party convention. The Mexican media disapproved of Bush's electoral moves prior to the convention; he was severely criticized as the electoral process advanced and his actions and election strategy were viewed more and more negatively.

As for Bush's performance in government, Jaime Mendoza García pointed out that he "has failed in several aspects of his presidency. Bush cannot escape the fact that he has neglected economic, social and environmental policies as a result of attempts to improve his ratings in public opinion polls." García also regards him as "the least suitable candidate to balance the budget, since he is not prepared to make drastic cuts in military spending and stubbornly refuses to raise taxes to reduce the cost of public health." (*El Universal*, July 25:6A)

The president was not only criticized on the domestic front. On the question of foreign policy, the media expressed concern that Bush might be prepared to use the conflict surrounding Iraq's refusal to allow UN inspections for electoral purposes.

In its July 30 editorial, *El Universal* noted that if the US started a new war game in the Persian Gulf, "We would be witnessing a near collapse of the US political system, not just because world peace could be jeopardized in the interests of re-election but mainly because of what this would imply for Washington's ruling structure, currently so much in dispute and lacking validity in the population's eyes."

According to Jenaro Villamil, Bush's chosen tactic has been to "adopt last-minute policies to improve his



Periódico El Universal.

popularity ratings and make him the only leader capable of governing the US in these times of world reorganization." (*El Financiero*, August 13:42)

Bush's paradoxical situation was also mentioned, "While Bush stands to lose the election, his arch-enemy Saddam Hussein has managed to stay in power." (Rayuela, *La Jornada*, August 12:48)

As for government strategy, the press criticized Bush's nomination of James Baker, "his pal Jim" in Emilio Zebadúa's words, as director of the campaign and various aspects of the convention.

In a *La Jornada* editorial, Baker's nomination was seen as a "risky move" since it is plausible that "Baker's absence from the State Department might be felt in US foreign policy—the only area where Bush dare boast of his achievements—which would then backfire on the Republicans." In addition, *La Jornada* did not think this

would guarantee a reversal of Bush's overwhelming disadvantage against Clinton in mid-August.

Furthermore, *La Jornada* states that, "at the time, it is worth remembering that while Baker is certainly a skillful politician, he is not a miracle worker." (August 14:2)

At the convention, the Republican Party showed signs of internal weakness and differences in spite of its relentless attacks on Clinton.

The *Jornada's* August 19 editorial observed that "two days into the much-heralded National Republican Party convention, each and every speech read out at the Houston Astrodome has been filled with rhetoric, clichés and gratuitous attacks, without an ounce of political substance, a sorry state of affairs for a world power like the United States. This political act would seem to be an accurate reflection of the economic and social crisis the country is currently experiencing."

Bush's campaign has been plagued by serious differences between "traditional" Republicans and "hard-line" conservatives, leading to the eventual break-up of the conservative coalition that has kept the Republican Party in the White House for the past 12 years.

The religious far right, with Pat Buchanan as one of its main spokesmen, took over the convention, putting forward "one of the most right-wing political platforms in the party's history," characterized by "Republican political and religious fundamentalism."

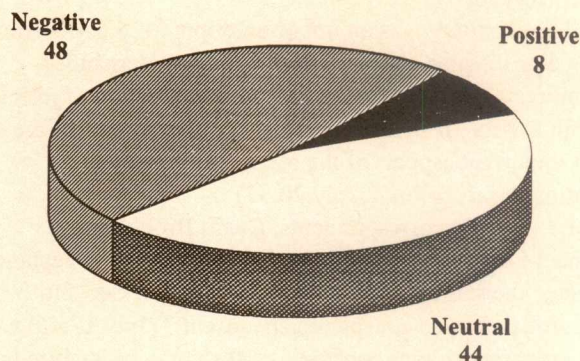
In his description of the polemic surrounding abortion and women's freedom of choice, and the contradiction that numerous convention delegates felt as a result of opinions on the subject expressed in the platform, José Carreño Figueras noted that "the traditional Right constitutes the nucleus of Republican support and Bush cannot afford to challenge it, even though he and his family adopt a much more moderate position and the Right itself distrusts the president." (*El Universal*, August 17:1)



AFP.

View of the Democratic convention.

Graph 2
Mexican press rating of US elections
(percentages)



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers. July-August 1992.

For Bush and the Republicans, this implies the possibility of losing support from moderate sectors both inside and outside the party. *La Jornada* correspondents Cason and Brooks noted that "even though platforms are hardly ever part of the next administration's policies, the far right's position on social issues such as the family, homosexuality, AIDS, pornography, federal funding for the arts and particularly abortion, could alienate potential Republican voters." (August 16:35)

Similarly, a *La Jornada* editorial considers that by exchanging the pragmatism that characterized his government measures for the conservative family values of his election platform, Bush is "expressly forgoing a struggle with Bill Clinton for the broad mass of moderate, center or not necessarily conservative voters and aiming his political message at a sector of voters that, notwithstanding the end of the cold war, still maintain a schematic, Manichean view of the world, as though everything could be reduced to a struggle between good and evil." (August 22:2)

As for Bush's attacks on Clinton, Jim Cason and Pedro E. Armendares note that "these attacks, however, may be much less effective than in the past as US citizens begin to despair about the state of the economy and show more interest in pulling out of the recession than in defending the country from the ideological extremes described by Republican spokesmen." (*La Jornada*, August 18:48)

The press sensed a severe crisis in almost all campaign issues except those concerning Mexico. The economy, employment, economic, budget, trade and foreign policy and Iraq, to mention only the most commonly-discussed topics, are all very negatively rated.

Topics covered, the NAFTA and Mexico

The Mexican press covered topics in both conventions that it considered most important for the United States. In the press' view, the topics mentioned, in order of importance, were NAFTA, US economy, employment, Mexico, Mexico-US relations, foreign policy, budget and trade policies, the environment and economic policy. The same list applied for both Clinton and Bush, except that education was an important issue for Clinton, while Iraq was for Bush.

By grouping the variables under four main headings, it is evident that the Mexican press considered the US domestic economy the most important issue, followed by Mexico, foreign policy and social problems. The candidates' averages show that Bush is generally rated very negatively and hardly ever given a positive rating, while Clinton's ratings are fairly evenly divided between the three categories.

Bush's handling of the economy and social issues is very negatively rated, while his approach to foreign policy and Mexico is viewed more favorably. Clinton is rated positively on the issues where Bush fares worst, his weakest area being foreign policy, while his ratings for Mexico are almost the same as Bush's. (Graph 4)

It is interesting that Mexico is positively associated with the US electoral process, more so by Republicans than Democrats. This can be explained by the fact that the Mexican press echoed statements regarding the benefits that would accrue to Mexico under NAFTA.

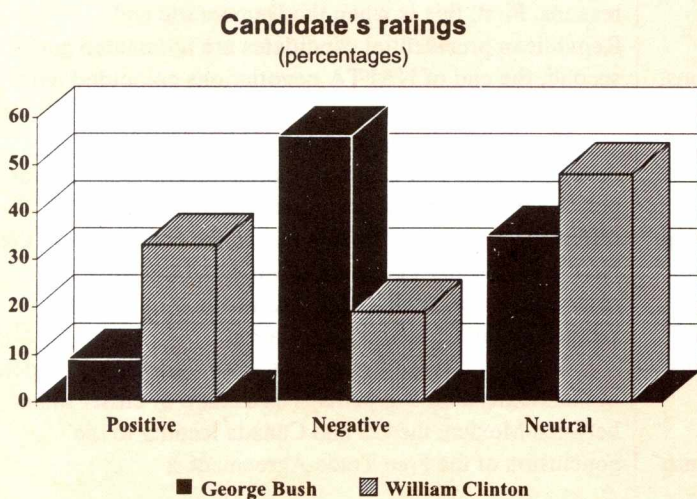
In fact, some Mexican papers continued giving greater priority to candidates' views on NAFTA than "real campaign issues", with the result that candidates' views on the subject influenced the media's opinion.

The tie between Bush, Clinton and Perot in July, for example, caused uncertainty in several papers, since NAFTA negotiations and bilateral relations could be affected by a victory by either Clinton, who had not yet committed himself, or Perot.

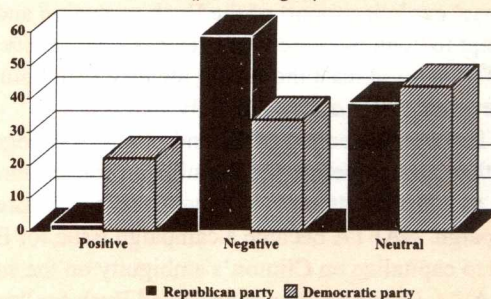
From our point of view, developments in NAFTA negotiations between Mexico, the US and Canada provided some Mexican sectors with a new perspective on US domestic political processes in general and the presidential election in particular, i.e. the fact that the success or failure of trade negotiations depended on the position of the US Executive branch or the Congress.

Salinas' visit to San Diego to talk to Bush just at the time of the Democratic convention was interpreted by columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa as evidence of

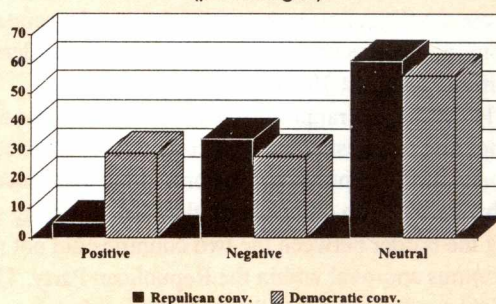
Graph 3



Party ratings (percentages)

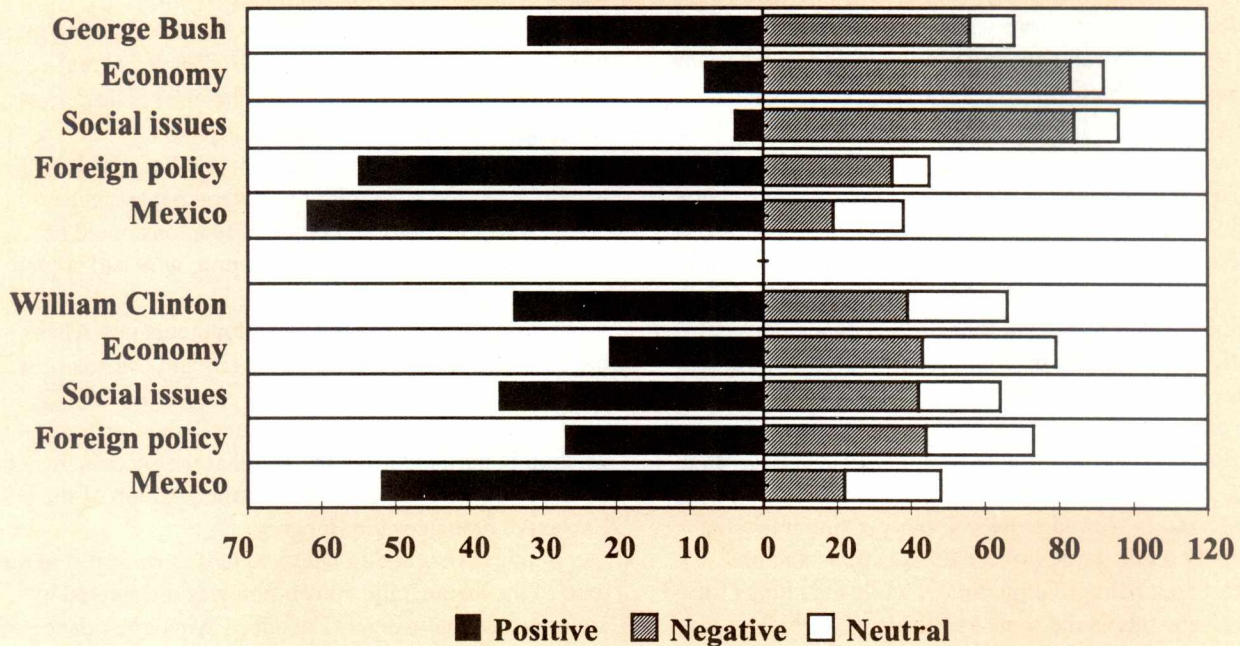


Convention ratings (percentages)



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers. July-August 1992.

Graph 4
Press rating of campaign issues
 (percentages)



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers. July-August 1992.

Salinas' explicit support of the Bush campaign and an attempt to "win over the vast Mexican community in California, or at least those who identify with Salinas' achievements." (*La Jornada*, July 14:1)

The announcement of the end of NAFTA negotiations less than a week before the Republican convention was seen as a further attempt to revive Bush's lackluster campaign. NAFTA became a campaign issue for Bush who tried to capitalize on Clinton's ambiguity on the subject.

A *La Jornada* editorial criticized Bush for "supporting NAFTA not just to help reactivate the beleaguered US economy but also to shore up his campaign." It was even more critical of the fact that "an economic issue should become a political weapon overnight as a desperate means to convince voters of the American dream's leadership qualities." (August 19:2)

However, the rapprochement between Salinas and Bush did nothing to forestall the harsh criticism of Mexico included in the Republican platform at the insistence of Pat Buchanan. As with other issues, the idea of putting up a wall along the border between the two countries did not meet with unanimous approval within the Republican Party. This incident suggests some of the difficulties that may arise in Mexico-US relations, presidential good will notwithstanding.

Conclusions

Media coverage increased during the conventions for two reasons. First, this is when the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates are nominated and second, the end of NAFTA negotiations coincided with the election campaigns.

The consequences of Ross Perot's candidacy, the development of Bill Clinton's campaign and Bush's poor performance led the Mexican press to view Clinton differently. In spite of Bush's role in the conclusion of the NAFTA talks, his attacks on Clinton and the latter's reservations concerning NAFTA, media opinion was swayed by the US domestic situation.

Growing interest in the US electoral process is evident in the Mexican media, perhaps as a result of closer links between Mexico, the US and Canada leading to the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement. ❧

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