

Mexican press coverage of the US elections

(Final Part)

Main characteristics of news coverage

600 news articles written by Mexicans were published in six newspapers on the subject of the last stage of the US Presidential elections; that is, an average of 60 articles per week. This represents the greatest number of references on the topic over the nearly 40 weeks comprised in the study.¹

During September, the Mexican press' emphasis on the election campaign decreased after the attention devoted to the Democratic and Republican conventions.² The media's interest began to rise again in October, for various reasons: the return of independent candidate Ross Perot to the presidential race; the Democrat candidate Bill Clinton's support for the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, Canada and the United States; the initialing of the Free Trade Agreement in San Antonio, Texas attended by Presidents Bush and Salinas de Gortari and Prime Minister Mulroney; and developments in the debates between Bush, Clinton and Perot.

Coverage reached its maximum level with articles on the November 3 elections and commentaries on Clinton's election as President of the United States (Table 1).

The topic of the elections remained in the first sections (national and international news) and on the front pages. The previously observed trend was reversed: six out of ten articles were datelined Mexico, and the remainder in the United States. This is explained by the fact that a greater proportion of the articles (four out of ten) fell into the category of opinions or commentaries. The newspapers

¹ Articles written exclusively by Mexicans for six Mexico City dailies (*El Día, La Jornada, El Nacional, El Sol de México, El Universal and unomásuno*) were coded according to a guide which included 150 variables concerning the election campaign. The coded information was processed with the Statistical Program in Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Articles which mentioned the elections, but whose main concern was some other topic, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, or the Torricelli Law on Democracy in Cuba, were excluded from the analysis.

² For an analysis of the candidates and the Democrat and Republican party conventions, see the article "Mexican press coverage of the US elections, Part III", *Voices of Mexico* 22, January-March, 1993.

The aim of this article is to present some aspects of the coverage, by several Mexican newspapers, of the last stage of the US Presidential elections held on November 3. This analysis centers on news articles written exclusively by Mexican writers, and covers the period from September 1 to November 9, 1992.

which published the greatest number of references were *La Jornada, El Universal* and *El Nacional*, which, taken together, published six out of every ten articles.

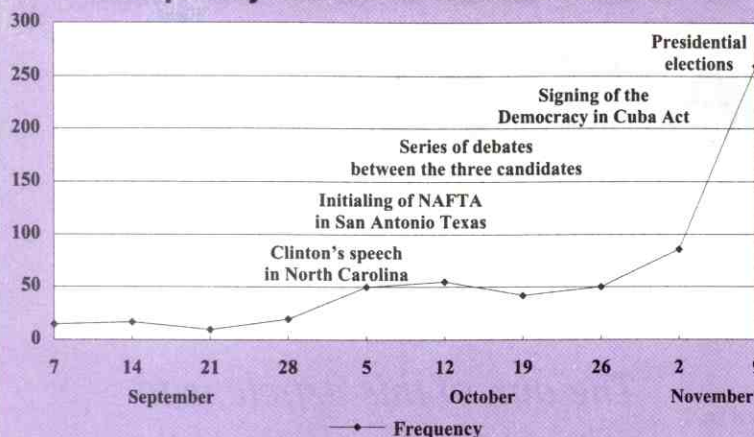
As regards the opinions expressed in these articles, the positive trend increased (Table 2).³ The main sources on which the articles' authors relied were the communications media, the Democrat Party and the Executive Branch.

The NAFTA and the elections

In general, the Mexican press' perceptions of the US elections remained distorted by each of the individual candidate's positions on the Free Trade Agreement. Independent candidate Ross Perot, who maintained his opposition to the NAFTA agreement, influenced the repeated mention of the issue in the pages of the Mexican press.

³ Each variable considered in the analysis includes a series of values which quantify the way in which an issue or a public figure is perceived by the press. Favorable opinions were coded as positive values; critical opinions were given a negative value, and neutral values were assigned when the person or issue was reported on without comment.

Table 1
Frequency of articles on US elections



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers. September-November 1992.

President Bush adopted the NAFTA agreement as a campaign theme, with the aim of regaining his lead in the race. Correspondent Rodolfo Medina pointed out that "...with the Presidential race barely picking up steam, NAFTA is not only a hostage, but also a pawn in a game in which Bush uses the agreement as a means of harassing and putting pressure on Clinton, in the hope of winning the whole chess match." (*unomásuno*, September 7: 15).

From September on, the news media centered their attention on the possibility that Clinton might support NAFTA. For this reason, wide coverage was given to Clinton's October 4 speech in North Carolina, in which he supported NAFTA, but on the condition that parallel agreements be negotiated on labor and environmental issues.

In response, an editorial in *La Jornada* stated that Clinton's support for NAFTA "could be perceived as an attempt to gain campaign points in the race against Bush, who has made the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement a central issue in his re-election campaign." (October 5: 2).

In the same vein, *El Universal* correspondent José Carreño Figueras wrote that "according to Democrat sources, Clinton's announcement had several purposes, including taking the steam out of Bush's accusations before the round of debates, and diminishing the political-electoral significance of the NAFTA 'initialing' ceremony in San Antonio, Texas" (October 3: 21).

Once the Democrat candidate had come out in favor of NAFTA, the Mexican press' view of Clinton moved towards the positive side. As soon as the two main presidential candidates, Clinton and Bush, declared that they would work toward the signing of the Free Trade

Agreement, the Mexican press tried to analyze other campaign issues. NAFTA regained force as an issue for the Mexican press when Clinton won the elections.

The candidates and the issues of debate

The analysis carried out reveals a highly positive view of Clinton (43 percent), much higher than the proportion of positive references for either of the other two candidates. President Bush, on the other hand, was the subject of the highest percentage of negative references (59 percent). Finally, Ross Perot received the highest percentage (52 percent) of neutral references (Table 3).

There were other issues of debate besides NAFTA. News media reported that the 1992 elections represented the first to be held since the end of the Cold War, from which the United States had emerged as the world's only superpower.

This meant that the old debate issues (the Communist threat, the Soviet Union, defense policies, etc.) gave way to new issues, stemming from the domestic problems which had not been solved by the preceding three Republican administrations. The economic crisis, unemployment, the loss of world economic dominance, and the deterioration of the nation's social fabric became the new issues on the political agenda.

In this context, the Presidential candidates designed their electoral strategies in the hope of emphasizing their advantages and discrediting their opponents. This could be seen in the three debates held on October 11, 15 and 19 between Bush, Clinton and Perot.

In general, the tone of the debates was set by what took place in the first one. Clemente Ruíz Durán wrote in *El Nacional* that the first debate was "unequal: on one side, the exhausted Republican President, who was unable to convince the American people why he should be re-elected.

Opposing him was a dynamic Democrat candidate capable of transmitting the idea of political change and coherence, with which he was able to consolidate his standing in the public opinion. Finally, an independent candidate who, by a series of perceptive remarks, attracted applause and gave an air of irony to the Presidential debate" (October 13:24). We shall now analyze the general performance of the Democrat and Republican candidates in the weeks before the elections.⁴

⁴ For reasons of space, the performance of independent candidate Ross Perot is not analyzed here. This does not imply any slighting of the merit of his position on the two-party American political system.

areas of debate which proved particularly thorny for him, given his inevitable responsibility for the country's prolonged recession; his rhetoric sounded shopworn, lacked conviction and reflected a high degree of uncertainty." (*unomásuno*, October 21: 22)

La Jornada stated in an editorial that "by continuing his McCarthy-style attacks on his Democrat opponent, and repeated criticism of Clinton's economic program, without enunciating one of his own, George Bush figured as the loser last night" (October 12: 2).

The media also criticized his stance of casting doubt upon Clinton and Gore's integrity, their character and their ability to run the country, as well as his attempt to sow fear among the American people about a series of changes proposed by Clinton; this reflected his inability to regain his standing in the polls.

Candidate Clinton. He oriented his campaign and his participation in the debates towards the issues which truly interested the electorate: the United States' domestic economic and social problems. In the same way as Perot, he stressed the importance of designing economic policies which would allow the United States to pull out of the economic recession, reduce the budget deficit, allow American industry to regain its competitiveness and protect the environment.

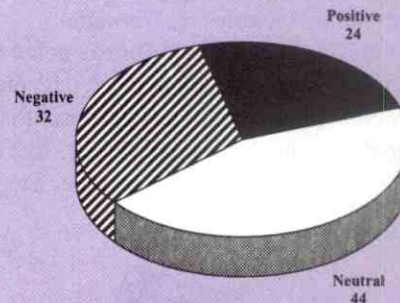
Clinton stated that the strength of the United States' position rested on the strengthening of its economy. Guillermo Castro commented that "At the close of the electoral campaign, the linchpin of Democrat strategy is now to attack the main column of support for the President: the military and the military-industrial complex. Clinton has, in effect, managed to link the twin problems of hegemony abroad and prosperity at home, in fact converting the US economy into a national security problem. As part of this, for example, he has proposed granting the economy greater importance in foreign policy, by creating a Council on Economic Security similar to the National Security Council" (*El Día*, October 22: 14).

La Jornada correspondents Jim Cason and David Brooks, however, considered that "beyond economic and commercial policies, it is difficult to obtain more than an outline of what a possible Clinton Administration foreign policy would be" (October 25: 46).

In foreign policy, a low-profile area in his campaign, he supported the embargo on Cuba and, in general, came out for continuing the policy directions adopted by the United States to date. Moreover, he proposed reforms in education, the health-care system, Social Security and abortion rights.

Clinton and Perot were the candidates who best perceived the mood of the American public and who adopted themes of immediate interest to them; themes such as the economic crisis, unemployment, American

Table 2
Mexican press rating of US elections
(percentages)



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers. September-November 1992.

industry's loss of competitiveness, and the budget deficit, among others.

President Bush, on the other hand, was the least able to respond to the new situation, as he clung grimly to his defense of family values, his foreign policy record, and his attacks on Clinton and Gore. This was reflected in Clinton's lead over Bush in the opinion polls, and his subsequent victory.

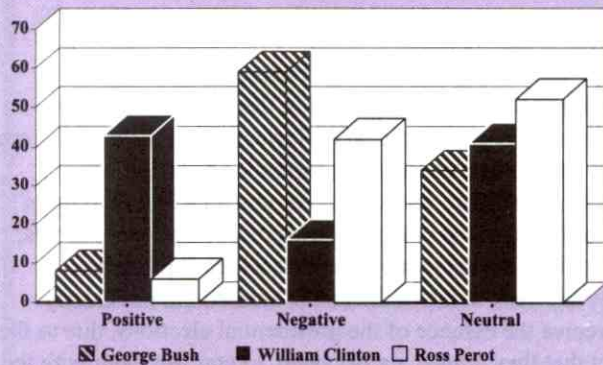
In an editorial, *El Día* stated that "though [the candidates'] speeches refer to unemployment, since here it is a question of winning over the electorate, the truth is that in the face of the loss of dynamism and the drop in family income over the last few years, the underlying issue is the way in which economic dominance can be regained; as, for them, it is clear that the loss of this leadership, if not reversed, will result in the questioning of the political and military dominance of the US" (*El Día*, October 19: 5).

The Mexican press coverage of these debate issues reflected the reasons for Clinton's triumph. The issues which received the greatest attention on the part of the media were, in descending order: NAFTA, the US economy, employment, foreign policy, economic policy, Mexico, commercial policy, and US-Mexican relations.

The issues mentioned here coincide with those which were most important for Bill Clinton, but not those of President Bush. Budget policy and social problems were more frequently mentioned than Mexico and US-Mexican relations.

The positive view which the media had of President Bush up until August disappeared in the area of foreign policy, and added to this were negative commentaries on his administration's record in the economic and social sphere. As regards Mexico, the positive consensus on Bush also diminished, but not to the same extent that occurred in foreign policy matters. Bush's image in the Mexican press became a negative one.

Table 3
Opinion Trends
(percentages)



Source: Based on articles published in six Mexico City morning papers, September-November 1992.

In Clinton's case the opposite happened, since he was able to increase the number of positive views on the issues of the economy, social affairs and Mexico; only in the field of foreign policy did the tendency towards positive views decrease, and neutral references increase. In total, Clinton's image improved by decreasing negative commentaries, maintaining positive views and increasing neutral references (Table 4).

It is surprising that the media should have left President Bush and his relationship with Mexico to one side, transferring their interest to Clinton's agenda and analyses of the impact on relations with Mexico.

Clinton's victory: its meaning and challenges

With the above-mentioned agenda, Clinton was able to forge a new alliance with various sectors: he regained the support of conservative white Democrats, as well as segments of the middle class dissatisfied with the economic situation and who felt betrayed by the tax increases decreed by Bush; he also attracted the support of certain sectors of corporate America, which before had almost always given their support exclusively to the Republicans.

Some traditional Republican party voters went for Clinton in the light of his turn to the right on issues such as abortion; women supported Clinton for precisely the same reason. On the other hand, he maintained the support of sectors identified with the Democrats, such as labor unions, blacks and Hispanics.

Finally, Clinton benefitted from an unprecedented interest in voter registration and voting on the part of groups which, up to this time, had not shown interest in the electoral process; a fact which was reflected in the highest level of voter participation recorded in recent decades.

Sergio Aguayo Quezada wrote in *La Jornada* that "Clinton withstood all the blows while weaving a new network of alliances for the Democrats. And he displayed great political acuity: he distanced himself from controversial activist Jesse Jackson, but he cultivated hundreds of Negro leaders. He recovered moderate whites, without breaking ties with organized labor. Once again, he demonstrated that winning the Presidency in this country requires enunciating a message in various directions, with one central theme. His theme was change, and that was what a majority of Americans wanted" (November 4: 13).

Bush's defeat is explained by the disintegration of the conservative alliance which carried the Republicans to the White House in the 1980's. Bush lost the support of the so-called 'Reagan Democrats' —conservative Democrats who voted for the Republicans between 1980 and 1988. Moreover, he did not win the unanimous support of the large corporations. He also lost the support of moderate Republicans dissatisfied with his position on abortion, and other issues reflected in the Republican platform.

On the other hand, he never obtained the support of the unions, nor of the blacks nor the Hispanics, with the exception of Cuban-Americans who supported him based on his signing of the Democracy in Cuba Act, known as the Torricelli Law.

A factor which also explains Bush's defeat was the presence of independent candidate Ross Perot in the electoral race. His candidacy made 1992 an "odd year for politics". His participation in the debates indirectly aided Clinton and damaged Bush, due to his insistent focus on the issue of the economy.

In Joseph Hodara's view, "Perot has broken down the traditional American two-party system with the force of his personality and his money. He forced the Republicans and the Democrats to define their positions; and he polarized Bush in respect to Clinton. Perot, moreover, is the hero of these elections. His freshness (in both senses of the word) has provided a breath of fresh air for American society. And, if the traditional apathy which affects half of the electorate changed to feverish participation, then Perot is responsible" (*El Universal*, November 5: 6). In *La Jornada*, David Brooks and Jim Cason pointed out that "if Ross Perot wanted to shake up the system, he has done it" (October 28: 45).⁵

The media also began to write about the prospects and challenges which awaited the Democrat Administration of President-Elect Clinton. Emilio Zebadúa wrote in *La Jornada* that "the strategic objective of his governmental program is strengthening the US position in the world—a

⁵ In earlier articles in this series, clues can be found to the determinative causes involved in Clinton's victory and Bush's defeat, as well as to the success and significance of Perot in the American political system.

position which has been undermined by a lack of competitiveness in key sectors of industry, and by the consequences of the recession. Thus, domestic political policies are interwoven, more than ever, with international relations” (November 4: 5).

Clinton’s victory gave rise to various types of interpretations on the part of the Mexican press; their common denominator is the sensation of something more profound, a new stage in the history of the United States and the international system: the end of Neo-Liberalism and the possibility of an improvement in the international sphere.

La Jornada points out in an editorial that “in the final analysis, US voters are proposing something more than just a generational changing of the guard. They are saying, in capitalism’s very center and bulwark, free trade by itself is not enough to guarantee the standards of living of a majority of the population and that the State must intervene to ensure a better distribution of income, just as it did in the era of Keynesian economics, through the regulation of various economic activities” (November 4: 2).

Sergio Rodríguez writes that during the twelve years of Republican Administrations “An attempt was made to bury the old concept of the State as benefactor, inherited from the New Deal, without making serious progress toward a new type of State” (*El Universal*, November 5: 7).

Carlos Fuentes, in an article entitled “Bill Clinton, the Brave” estimated that Clinton and Gore “without doubt will know how to rerank priorities and, above all, put their house in order. The major problems for the US today are to be found within the United States. The US will have a respectable voice abroad only if it first takes care of its

internal problems, and then gives up its indefensible arrogance and joins the world in the urgent tasks of economic cooperation, respect and the extension of international legality” (*La Jornada*, November 3: 1).

General conclusions

In general terms, the Mexican press provided ample coverage of the 1992 elections in the United States. It attempted to give its readers information on the events from its own sources, as well as information from the news agencies and wire services. It demonstrated that the press cannot be ignored in any analysis of international politics, given the Mexican view of events which it presents. Nevertheless, some of the media studied did not clearly perceive the essence of the presidential elections, due to the fact that they tended, on occasion, to confuse them with the Congressional elections taking place at the same time.

Events do not yet justify a review of the possible consequences of Bill Clinton’s victory for internal affairs and on the level of bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States. Even before the Democrats’ victory, the press began to publish analyses of its possible concrete effects on Mexican society, economy and politics.

The importance given by the Mexican press to the US elections was reflected in an increase in interest on the part of the Mexican public, with the effect that this overshadowed the NAFTA.

Miguel Angel Granados Chapa wrote: “The extensive, intensive and unprecedented coverage which the news media have given to the early stages of the US elections to be held this Tuesday, and which election day itself so richly deserves, is a clear indication that this phenomenon has come to form a part of the nation’s concerns.

What is happening today beyond our northern border will have far-reaching consequences for our present and our future. Perhaps this is not the first this has happened, but it is without doubt the first time we are so clearly aware of it” (*La Jornada*, November 3: 1).

The aim of this series of four articles has been to identify and analyze the coverage of the US presidential and congressional elections provided by certain selected organs of the nation’s press. We hope to have fulfilled our objective of documenting the Mexican view of the US electoral process. The last word is, of course, left to the reader

Graciela Cárdenas
 Marcela Osnaya
 Miguel Acosta
 Research Assistants,
 CISEUA, UNAM.

