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U.S. presidential election portrayed by foreign media: Costa Rica and Nicaragua comparative study

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U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PORTRAYED BY FOREIGN MEDIA:

COSTA RICA AND NICARAGUA COMPARATIVE STUDY

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors with Distinction

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Abstract

The U.S. presidential election not only grabs a lot of media attention from the United States, but it also catches the attention of media from around the world. How does the foreign media portray the U.S. presidential election? This study seeks to answer a piece of this question through an analysis of media sources in Costa Rica and Nicaragua in the hopes of better informing audiences on the potential frames their media be constructing their information through. The analysis considers the tone, along with the articles' conversations of policy and personality of the candidates. After selecting 10 articles from each country surrounding the U.S. presidential election, it was determined that there was no major difference regarding personality and policy discussions, and in general the Costa Rican media source, La Nacion, had a more positive tone than the Nicaraguan media source, Nicavison.

Introduction

This study focuses on the foreign media's portrayal of American politics, specifically on the coverage surrounding the U.S. presidential election. Through a content analysis comparative case study of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, one can see how news sources from each of these countries are portraying the American election and if the different forms of government create a variation between the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan media. A comparative study method was chosen to partially answer the question of: how does the foreign media portray U.S. politics? With this being such a broad question, it was necessary to narrow it down and make the task manageable through a two-country compare and contract analysis. Costa Rica and Nicaragua were selected based on their similarities in location and culture yet differences in government and former relations with the United States. Some of this is reflected in the Freedom's House Global Freedom Scores. Costa Rica was rated at 91, landing itself in the "free" category, meaning that there is a large amount of political rights and civil liberties. On the other hand, Nicaragua scored a 30, placing it in the "not free" category, with a low amount of political rights and civil liberties (2021). This information leads to the expectation that democratic Costa Rican media will have a more positive tone of the democratic U.S., while the not-so-democratic Nicaragua will have a more negative tone of the U.S.

Understanding the media's representation of specific issues, such as the election, is important to comprehend as the media's portrayal and biases do affect how the audience thinks about these topics. Media bias cannot always be stopped but the bias can create a level of control. The filters created by biased media have possible ramifications of shaping an audience that only views issues one-way and will not compromise in relating to those now in their lense. This creates a polarized system with the potential of constant arguing and lack of ability in

getting problems solved through compromise. With the recent heated topics on international relations issues, such as immigration, it is particularly important to understand and recognize the frames in which audiences are receiving their information. Research like this study has the potential to better inform audiences, both the American and foreign public, on the lens or perspective they are receiving their information through in order to make them less likely to be influenced by manipulation or biased news sources.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades as media has become more prevalent globally through its various forms - newspaper, television, social media and beyond - more research has been done on how the news is being portrayed to the public. Most of past research has been centered on the American media and its portrayals of both American and international issues. There is a major gap in the research of foreign media and its portrayal of American issues even though research has shown that media located in countries outside the U.S. have relatively high coverage of American news. A general consensus is that American media gives very little time and coverage to international news unless it is an area where the U.S. has some strategic interest (Graber & Dunaway, 2018). In fact, analyses have shown that European, English, Canadian, Latin American, and Asian newspapers use disproportionately larger amounts of international news than their American counterparts (Lent, 1977). It has also been found that there is a chronic decline of elite foreign correspondents coupled with the proliferation of alternative sources of foreign news (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004).

Comparisons of News Outlets

With all this being said, more recently there have been a few studies comparing media sources from different countries. One study analyzed how the U.S. press covered both the 2008 and 2016 campaigns in comparison with the press in six West European countries (Van Aelst et al., 2018). They analyzed two characteristics of campaign coverage of 14 different newspapers from six different countries: (1) the tone or degree of negativity and (2) the substantial nature of the coverage. In the end they stated, “Our results confirm that substantial issue coverage is low, and a negative view of candidates and the campaign is prevailing. Although there is variation in the coverage within and between the countries under study, structural differences between the press in the U.S. and Europe are almost absent...we argue that shared news values and the specific context of campaigns determine news coverage across the board” (Van Aelst, 2018, p. 4731). Additionally, these researchers found that the overall tone toward American campaigns is slightly negative. They wrote, “In terms of specific candidates, there were, again, few differences, with only the European press covering Obama slightly more positively in 2008. This small variation between European newspapers and U.S. newspapers might reflect public opinion in European countries, which is, in general, more in line with a Democratic president” (Van Aelst, 2018, pp. 4746-4747). This is in contrast to the United States where about half of its citizens are Republican and half are Democrat. This division could create that more general negative tone.

There is an incredibly small amount of research with information about the foreign media and their portrayals of the U.S., like the research study described above. Yet still, this only focuses on media from the West. Another study from 2016 compared the British news source, BBC, to the Middle Eastern news source, Aljazeera. Here one can learn more about a non-

Western media outlet. Ezeah and Emmanuel (2016) described their critical evaluation of foreign media coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency. This incident started in 2009 when the jihadist group, Boko Haram, started an armed rebellion against the government of Nigeria. They looked at 12 stories and found that “BBC framing of Boko Haram insurgency took stereotypic dimension of age-long and deep-rooted narratives of western media that associate Islam with barbarism, killing, suicide-bombing, fanaticism, extremism, and terrorism. Al-Jazeera posture on Boko Haram coverage on the other hand, tends to counter the stereotypic disposition and dominant narratives of western media by establishing the fact that there are ‘good’ Muslims who are committed to propagating peace in the multi-religious society” (Ezeah & Emmanuel, 2016, p. 30). These researchers feel that global media organizations, like the BBC, continue to exert influence on African polity. They go on to say that those who fund these media organizations create the tone and coloration of the political, economic, social, and religious coverage. Ezeah and Emmanuel stated, “Foreign media coverage of a country has huge implications, as the tone of the coverage can either portray the country from a negative or positive dimension, and this in return affects the perception of foreign audiences about the country” (2016, p. 41). This study shows the potential of non-Western media outlets and its views of non-Western events. It brings about the question: what would non-Western media have to say about Western events?

Latin American Media

There is a lack of research surrounding Latin American media sources. As previously mentioned, non-Western cultures tend to get less attention globally than Western ones. Particularly, there is little to no past research regarding Latin American media portrayal of American issues, which, as discussed, are covered. However, there is some research surrounding

Latin American media in general. Recently, political scientists and communication experts have found a general decline of press freedom across the region, especially in some countries like Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Bolivia. Kellam (2018) related this downfall of press freedom in the nations to the media being privatized and majorly in the hands of the wealthy. This created a large disparity between the conservative media and the left-ist governments. He writes, “Leftist presidents interpreted the opposition of the media to their governments as resistance to their democratizing reforms and progressive agendas; in response, they publicly confronted the media, used various means to bypass mainstream media, passed stricter media regulations, and expanded state media” (Kellam, 2018, p. 45). With these governments having more control over the media, they can regulate what information is given to the public. Llorente (2019) described a scene of this phenomenon in *100% Noticias* in Nicaragua, “Nicaraguans of all walks of life used to fill the reception area of 100% Noticias daily, waiting to speak with the independent news channel’s journalists about how they were being harassed by the police, paramilitary and other government-linked entities. Since December, the building has been devoid of journalists. Armed police guard the former 100% Noticias headquarters in Managua, and the channel’s leading journalists are in exile”(p.1). The Nicaraguan government was not pleased by coverage that could interfere with their policy, so they nearly got rid of the source of that coverage.

To better understand this, one can look at the progression of Nicaragua and its media. In 1979, dictator Anastasio Somoza was overthrown in a popular insurrection headed by the Sandinista National Liberation Fund. Artz described the secondary effects, “The sudden triumph brought workers and peasants to political power without much preparation...Media production and access paralleled the unevenness of the other new participatory social programs in literacy, education, health care, and social development” (Artz, 2016, p. 168). The election of Violeta

Chamorro in 1990, the candidate of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, led to deep cuts in social spending and a dismantling of “most of the economic, social, and communication gains of the revolution” (Artz, 2016, p. 175). In this transition, the media went from the participation of the community back to privatization. Understanding this background will help show the difference between democratic Costa Rican media and the media of Nicaragua.

One format of new source that is a bit harder for the government to control is social media. Many Latin Americans living in less-democratic nations do not have the same amount of access to social media as first world countries (Navarro, 2020). For example, in Costa Rica 73% of the population is active on social media, compared to only 47% in Nicaragua. However, researchers discuss its increasingly important role in Latin American democracy. Some have found a strong, positive relationship between social media and democratic attitudes. Salzman described this, “Latin Americans who use social media for political purposes express greater tolerance of people who oppose the government. Social media users support political action among the general public more than those who do not use social media for political purposes” (Salzman, 2019, p. 96). Others, both scholars and citizens, have growing concerns about social media’s role in Latin America democracy. In 2020, “A Pew study of eleven developing countries found that large majorities believed social media and related technologies made people more informed, yet similar majorities also felt that these same tools left people more susceptible to manipulation” (Lupu et al., 2020, p. 160). As of late, there has been more awareness of fake news, however, much of the public still worries about its influence. “According to one 2019 study, 85 percent of Brazilians worried about distinguishing real news from fake on the internet” (Lupu et al., 2020, p. 160). Social media adds another layer to research surrounding people’s news sources. However, it is incredibly difficult to study and will not be the focus of this study.

The Media and Donald Trump

Donald Trump has always butted heads with the media, particularly since his rise in politics. As a famous rich man, former reality tv star, and now as one of the world's largest political figures, Trump never fails to receive attention from the media. This past year, Nwokora, Isakhan, and Pan (2020) studied and discussed the U.S. President Donald Trump's portrayal by two foreign media sources, the Guardian, out of the U.K., and the Australian, out of Australia. Both are Western news outlets, and as noted by the authors, both are friendly countries to the U.S. Additionally, both have relatively high amounts of coverage regarding Donald Trump. As a whole, they found "the majority of articles (56 per cent) concentrated on discussion of 'issues', including analysis of Trump's economic policy proposals and what his campaign suggests about democracy in America and the country's international relations. In contrast, studies of the domestic coverage of presidential nominating campaigns consistently show that by far, the dominant frame in campaign news coverage is the game schema" (Nwokora et al, 2020, p 13). Differing between these two media outlets, it was seen that the Australian focused more on Trump's authenticity, and the Guardian focused more on Trump's potential implications on international relations.

Latin America, as compared to Western cultures, may not be as favorable of President Trump. Dominguez (2017) wrote, "For Latin Americans, making America great again has meant a lethal combination of protectionism, the stoking of prejudices against Latinos in the US, and a ramping up of rhetoric against left governments in the region, especially Cuba and Venezuela" (p.1). This may suggest that some of these so-called leftist governments would not have

favorable news coverage of President Trump, particularly those that do not necessarily have a good relationship with the U.S., such as Cuba and Venezuela, and potentially Nicaragua.

Gaps in the Literature

In general, there is not a lot of past research regarding foreign media and their portrayal of American politics. There is, especially, a gap in the research surrounding non-Western media's portrayal of the U.S. This study worked to fill in the gap and discover how non-Western media sources out of Costa Rica and Nicaragua discuss American politics and how the two countries compare considering their differences in government and control of the press.

Research Question

The study described below works to answer the question: How does foreign media portray American politics? Because this is a broad question, for the sake of time and feasibility a more specific question was selected: How do Costa Rican and Nicaraguan medias compare in their coverage of the U.S. Presidential election? The focus is on non-Western media due to the lack of prior research with this topic. Additionally, the focus is on the U.S. Presidential election because it is a major event that receives a high volume of international media coverage. The expectation was that a more-democratic country with good relations with the United States, like Costa Rica, would represent the U.S. election in a more favorable light than a less-democratic country with not-as-good of relations with the United States, like Nicaragua.

This theory comes from research and the assumption of biases. It could be assumed, due to bias, that a country would be more favorable of a different country and its leaders if they share the same form of government. As seen in Nwokora (2020), the friendly Western democracies

had media that, although subject to their own biases and opinions, portrayed the U.S. president relatively tamely. From the previously mentioned statements of Dominguez (2017), the same could not be assumed of the leftists governments of Latin America.

Based on the literature and what is already known about the media, it was expected that each media will have its own biases. That media from a democratic nation, in this case Costa Rica, is more likely to have a favorable attitude with its democracy bias towards the U.S. election than its non-democratic counterpart, Nicaragua. Research like this can help audience members, both the foreign and American public, be aware of biases and differences in media portrayal of American issues so that they can be more inclined to recognize them and not be manipulated by them.

Methodology

In order to address the question regarding Costa Rica's and Nicaragua's media and their portrayal of the U.S. presidential election, a study was conducted to create generalized conclusions. First, media sources were selected from each country based on their popularity and centrality amongst other media sources within their respective countries. It was decided that only one media outlet from Costa Rica and one media outlet from Nicaragua would be used in order to keep the study simple and easy to manage. This study utilized 10 articles from each media source to create a comparison. Further research could use a similar study set up as the one described here but incorporate more media sources and more articles based on the time and resources available.

For Nicaragua, Nicavision (Canal 12) was selected as it is a common nationwide news source in the country. Its television channel broadcasts nationwide, and it owns local radio

stations throughout Nicaragua. For Costa Rica, La Nación was chosen. It is a nationwide Costa Rican newspaper that publishes daily, including its online formats. Both sources are major media sources within their respective countries and viewed similarly to how the average American may view a typically broadcasting network like NBC. Everyone has bias, including the media. However, Nicavision and La Nación have been viewed as fairly standard media sources lacking too heavy of bias on the political radar.

All 20 of the news articles, 10 from Nicavision and 10 from La Nación, used in this study were selected based on their content. To find articles on each media sources website, search terms such as “U.S. presidential election,” “Trump Biden,” and “Biden Trump” were used. The intention was to select articles discussing the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, its candidates, and related topics. The articles spanned from being published in August 2020 through November 2020. Initially, the goal was to select articles from both Nicavision and La Nación on similar topics, such as the same debate or same controversy. This proved to be more difficult than would have hoped. However, the intention was met as best as possible with articles and resources available. Article selection was based on relevancy to the U.S. 2020 presidential election and its published date. Articles surrounding the primaries were not considered for this study.

To analyze these articles in a methodological way, a rubric of analysis was created in the hopes of quantifying a data source requiring qualitative examination. When assessing media, articles, and bias, it is at first helpful to consider the tone of the article. Tone encompasses the general character or attitude of the piece of writing. Unfortunately, tone is subjective to the reader. As a judge of these articles, one should attempt to remain as neutral and fair in analysis as possible by looking for context clues in word choice and the author’s descriptions. Three main areas of focus were selected regarding tone: how is the United States discussed (positive or

negative), how is the then-candidate Biden discussed (positive or negative), and how is President Trump discussed (positive or negative). Each of these measures were placed on a five point scale with one being very negative and five being very positive. A three rating was used to indicate a neutral stance. If Biden and/or Trump was not mentioned within the article, that individual was not given a tone rating.

Besides the tone, the other metric of analysis used in this study was that of policy versus personality. This being a less subjective way of analyzing the selected articles used a simple check of “yes” or “no” if the article mentioned policy or personalities of the candidates. Research of U.S. media has found the media’s discussion of personality traits can influence the audience, stating, “Messages from the news media influence people... negative trait messages emanating from challengers and the press shape citizens’ impressions of incumbents... we find citizens rely heavily on traits when evaluating competing candidates in U.S. Senate campaigns, even controlling for voters’ party, ideological, and issue preferences” (Fridkin & Kenny, 2011, p. 61). Additionally, each of these featured subcategories with their own “yes” or “no” checks. Under policy, articles were searched for American domestic policy, foreign policy relevant to Latin America, immigration, and a short answer category to note other policy topics. Under personality, articles were searched for specific personality discussions surrounding Trump and Biden.

All of these metrics have been recorded in spreadsheet tables with separate tables for Costa Rica and Nicaragua, along with an additional table of averages comparing the two countries side by side. The tone will be averaged amongst all 10 articles for each media source. The personality and policy measurements are indicated as a percent of total out of the 10 articles. These tables showcase the results described below.

Results

After going through each of the 20 articles, reviewing for contextual and tonal indicators within the text, tables were constructed to display the results. Tables 1-3 can be found on the following pages. Table 1 and Table 2 display the raw data. Table 1 displays the analysis of the articles from Costa Rica's, La Nación, with the dates of the articles on the top row and the aspects of analysis in the first column. This is the same for Table 2 displaying the analysis of Nicavision. Some cells in Table 1 and Table 2 in the tone rows are blank if the article made no mention of Biden or Trump. In Table 1, one can see that articles dated 8/21, 10/23, 10/26, 11/3, 11/7, and 11/25 all featured a more positive tone for Biden in comparison to the tone used for Trump. Interestingly, all of these articles, except for the 11/7 article, received a three or neutral rating on the tonal scale in regards to their overall tone of the United States. This demonstrates how even when the overall tone is neutral, the media can still show favor to a particular candidate. Similarly, in Table 2 one can see that the Nicaraguan articles of 10/23, 11/4, and 11/23 follow the same trend of being more positive surrounding Biden over Trump, but still neutral to the United States overall. Although, Nicaragua's articles, in general, were more negative.

Table 3 summarizes the results through the use of averages for the tone and percents of total for the policy and personality checks. There were not many differences between the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan media as far as the amount of articles containing policy or personality as shown by the lack of major disparities. However, it can be seen that the Costa Rican media, La Nación, did have a more overall positive tone than the Nicaraguan media, Nicavision, both in regards to the candidates and to the United States in general. Costa Rica averaged 0.7 points

higher than Nicaragua with the U.S. category, 0.3 points higher with the Biden category, and 0.4 points higher with the Trump category. Although these are small differences, they still indicate a general contrast between the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan media.

Table 1 _____

Costa Rica	8/21	9/11	9/29	10/23	10/26	11/3	11/6	11/7	11/11	11/25
Tone: U.S. (1-5)	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3
Tone: Biden (1-5)	5		3	3	3	3	4	5		4
Tone: Trump (1-5)	2	3	3	2	2	2		2	1	3
Policy (Y or N)	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
-American domestic policy	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
-Foreign policy relevant to LA	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
-Immigration	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
-Other (short answer)	N	N	N	Y, foreign policy not relevant to LA	N	N	N	N	N	N
Personality (Y or N)	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
-Biden (Y or N, short answer)	Y, past, unite	N	N	N	Y, safety	N	N	Y, overcome divisions, Harris	N	Y, calm
-Trump (Y or N, short answer)	Y, no advantage, name calling	Y, \$	N	N	Y, insist on diverting	N	N	Y, controversal	Y, worrysome	N

Table 2

Nicaragua	8/11	9/23	9/28	9/29	10/2	10/23	11/4	11/4	11/9	11/23
Tone: U.S. (1-5)	3	2	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	3
Tone: Biden (1-5)	4			4		5	3		2	3
Tone: Trump (1-5)		1	1	2	1	2	2	3	2	2
Policy (Y or N)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N
-American domestic policy	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N
-Foreign policy relevant to LA	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
-Immigration	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
-Other (short answer)	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Personality (Y or N)	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y
-Biden (Y or N, short answer)	N	N	N	Y, favorable ground	N	Y, solid, never lost temper	Y, quote	N	N	N
-Trump (Y or N, short answer)	N	N	Y (negative, not paying taxes)	Y, not shaking hands	N	Y, radical attitude	Y, despite the fact	N	N	Y, legal processes

Table 3

Averages/Percent of Total	Costa Rica	Nicaragua
Tone: U.S. (1-5)	3.3	2.6
Tone: Biden (1-5)	3.8	3.5
Tone: Trump (1-5)	2.2	1.8
Policy (percent of total)	60%	60%
-American domestic policy	60%	40%
-Foreign policy relevant to LA	10%	20%

-Immigration	10%	0%
-Other (short answer)	10%	0%
Personality (percent of total)	60%	50%
-Biden	40%	30%
-Trump	50%	50%

Conclusion

The media has the power to shape how its audiences think about different topics. It can create a frame by which individuals understand different issues. Recognizing the potential biases and frames in which the media may be constructing their information is important so that the audience may become informed and be less likely to be influenced through manipulation by misleading biases and practices. Through research and analysis, it was found that the Costa Rican media, La Nación, in general, had a more positive tone surrounding its discussion of the U.S. presidential election than the Nicaraguan media, Nicavision. Costa Rica being a country with a strong democratic government may be influenced by the fact that Costa Rica does have a positive history and relationship with the United States. This is compared to Nicaragua where there is a more dictatorship-style government and rough former relations with the United States. Nicaragua not only has fewer articles in general discussing the United States, but the articles they did have were significantly shorter compared to the Costa Rican articles. This and the more negative tone may have been tied with form of government and the past relations Nicaragua has with the United States. With this in mind, one can see frames forming in which audiences will be receiving information. This raises new questions regarding the amount of control the government is placing on the media and the amount of influence the media has on the audience. How are these potential biases shaping how these audiences think about other issues other than the U.S. presidential election?

Due to the short time available to complete the project along with the lack of funds for access to additional media sources, fewer media sources and articles from different countries were utilized. It would be necessary to use more media sources and articles from different countries to make a direct conclusion that the results of this study and the assumption of democratic and non-democratic bias are in accordance with one another. Nonetheless, the study presented can better inform audiences both in the United States and abroad about the lense in which they are receiving their news. Being aware of the potential differences and biases across media will allow the audience to understand the frames of the material from the media. This, in turn, can hopefully minimize polarized thinking and lack of understanding and compromise among individuals.

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