Mexican Expatriates Vote? Framing and Agenda Setting in U.S. News Coverage About Mexico

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This content analysis examined framing and second-level agenda setting in U.S. newspaper pre-election coverage of the 2006 Mexican presidential elections and the new Mexican expatriate voting law. The authors conducted a quantitative analysis of 161 articles and a qualitative analysis of 36 articles in U.S. newspapers from August 2005 through mid-April 2006. Findings indicated that Andrés Manuel López Obrador received more coverage (59.6%) than Roberto Madrazo (27.8%) or the eventual winner, Felipe Calderón (29.1%). Candidate attributes were highlighted more than Mexican domestic or Mexico-U.S. issues. The dominant procedural frame was the election horse race. The main substantive frames were the election as an extension of U.S.-Mexico economic relations and the election as an extension of Latin American leftist/populist movements. The expatriate voting law was characterized as unsuccessful and blamed on apathetic voters, the Mexican government’s faulty implementation, and a corrupt system.

In June 2005, the Mexican Congress approved a plan that gave Mexican expatriates the right to vote in presidential elections at home for the first time. Mexico was poised to impress the world with its second modern election in July 2006, and this 2005 move meant that presidential candidates could earn votes from Mexicans living in the United States as well as in Mexico and elsewhere.

The congressional decision had potential significance. Out of the approximate 10 million Mexicans in the United States, 4 million were estimated to be eligible to vote in the Mexican election (Berstein, 2006). Given that the final outcome of the 2006 win was eventually alleged to be the difference of 233,831 popular votes out of 41 million ballots (Tobar, 2006b), U.S.-residing Mexicans could have made the difference. As we discuss later in this article, the registration process was straightforward although not without difficulties.

The extension of the vote to expatriates also was another step in Mexico’s move toward more inclusive and democratic elections. The prior 2000 election won by Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) candidate President Vicente Fox was Mexico’s first democratic appointment of a president since the beginning of the 20th century (Bruhn, 2004; Camp 2003; Rotthous & Alberro, 2005). Previous presidents in the past 7 decades had been selected by leaders of the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Now three major party candidates were getting attention: Felipe Calderón of PAN, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and Roberto Madrazo of PRI.

For the United States, both the expatriate voting decision and the 2006 elections had special significance. Although most foreign elections do not hit the news a few days before the event (if at all), the researchers anticipated that expatriate voting might be a news handle to start U.S. coverage of the Mexican elections earlier. This presented the opportunity to analyze an international news topic with domestic relevance that extended beyond international relations considerations that are more typically the focus of agenda-setting and framing studies (e.g., Inoue & Patterson, 2007). Thus, the objective of this study was to add to the literature on second-level agenda setting and framing in international news. We examined 9 months of coverage in the aggregate, and compared election coverage leading up to the absentee registration deadline of January 15 with coverage afterward through April 15. Little did we anticipate when we collected these data that Calderón’s slim win would be disputed by López Obrador and that election coverage would extend through the December 1 inauguration and beyond. The next section briefly discusses the U.S.-Mexico political context for the study, its theoretical foundations, and pertinent literature about coverage of Mexico.
BACKGROUND

U.S.–Mexico relations generally have been cordial during the past few years, despite disagreements over Iraq, U.S.–Mexico immigration policy, and some trade issues. Fundamental to the United States’s political relationship with Mexico is its economic relationship, which was cemented with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement under U.S. president George H. W. Bush and implemented during Bill Clinton’s administration. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has impact on both sides of the border, with 2005 U.S. exports to Mexico totaling $120 billion and imports from Mexico reaching $170 billion (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2006). Despite the success of NAFTA as measured in imports and exports, significant trade issues such as trade in agricultural products, the trucking industry, and the rules of origin remain disputed between the two countries (Villarreal, 2005). In addition, not all of the estimated benefits of NAFTA have materialized in Mexico. Since the treaty went into effect, economic growth in Mexico has averaged just 2.7% per year, the same rate of economic growth as in the decade prior to NAFTA’s creation (Stracke, 2003).

NAFTA has its pluses and minuses, but immigration is the most difficult issue in Mexico’s relationship with the United States. Mexico’s unemployment rate, down from 23% at the start of Fox’s administration but still hovering at approximately 18%, remains a strong “push” factor, whereas the United States’s thirst for cheap labor and unenforced light sanctions on businesses who hire undocumented laborers remain “pull” factors. Mexican migrants account for 57% of the total estimated undocumented population in the United States (Storrs, 2005). Although amnesty and migration human rights proposals were vetted by the Vicente Fox and George W. Bush administrations as early as 2001, the U.S. Congress was still discussing immigration proposals in 2007.

Immigration is not the only sensitive issue between the two countries. Mexico is a major supplier of heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana, and the major transit point for cocaine sold in the United States (Storrs, 2005). Long-standing issues like pollution and energy also remain on the U.S.–Mexico policy agenda.

The 2006 presidential election was important not only because of Mexico–U.S. relations, but U.S.–Latin American relations, too. The recent appointment of leftist or populist presidents in other Latin American nations such as in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil suggested that the Mexican election might contribute further to a Latin American shift to the left (Castañeda, 2006; Hakim, 2006). Despite democratic reforms, growth rates in Latin America have generally been sluggish, power is still concentrated, corruption remains, and there is a backlash against the neoliberal policies (Stracke, 2003). Accordingly, said Castañeda, “the combination of inequality and democracy” in Latin America’s evolving democracies is contributing to leftist orientations (p. 30).

Observers expressed two main concerns about the 2006 elections. The first was the fear of regressing toward old forms of government, where Mexican government corruption would increase and presidential power would strengthen again. These were prevailing tendencies of the 71-year-rule of the PRI (Krauze, 2006). The second was the delicate division of the three major parties; PAN, PRD, and PRI, and the difficulty of forming coalitions among the parties (Béjar & Breña, 2006; Krauze, 2006). As Vicente Fox found, the upcoming president’s ability to achieve reforms would be weakened because the parity within the legislative branch of the Mexican government would stunt proposal passage (Béjar & Breña, 2006).

In summary, the 2006 Mexican election was important to the United States because of Mexico’s economic partnership with its northern neighbor and joint political issues like migration and illegal drugs. In addition, Mexico’s election was significant because of its potential impact on the region and Western Hemisphere relations. The following section highlights why news about Mexican elections has relevance to mass communication scholars.

AGENDA SETTING AND FRAMING IN INTERNATIONAL ELECTION NEWS

Newspapers’ coverage of foreign elections is often driven by traditional international news determinants like a country’s cultural, economic, or political significance (Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Wu, 2000; Zaharopoulos, 1990). Foreign news volume also is correlated with the presence of news agencies (Wu, 2000) that retain their vital role in global news flow especially when other foreign bureaus decline. As Wu showed, countries without bureaus are less likely to surface in other nations’ news. Beyond these factors, intramedia characteristics about newspapers and the demographics of their readership matters, too. For instance, M. A. Johnson (1997) found that the percentage of the population with a Mexican heritage and circulation size were the strongest predictors of U.S. newspaper coverage of Mexico. Her analysis supported cultural proximity and organizational (“intramedia”) news determinants. Although these studies illuminate factors that explain why another country’s news is covered, they do not research how another country’s news is covered. Two useful theoretical foundations for investigating the salience and potential bias in coverage are second-level agenda setting and framing.
Agenda-setting theory is a long-standing media theory used to explain newspapers' influence on issues of relevance to the public (McCombs, 2005; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997). Agenda setting at its basic level focuses on news topics, but second-level agenda setting, or attribute agenda setting, explores the salience of public issues and other topics (Coleman & Banning, 2006; Ghanem, 1997; Kiouissis, 2005; Wanta, Golan, &Lee, 2004). Attributes are the characteristics about a news topic or object that are found in the media content. For instance, a political candidate's image has been defined as sets of traits or attributes described in media content, voter polls, or in a candidate's campaign materials (e.g., King, 1997, p. 37). We use traits, attributes, and characteristics interchangeably in this article. Frames, on the other hand, can be a collection of attributes that "promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman, 2004, p. 5). According to Entman, "substantive frames" define effects or conditions as problematic, identify causes, convey a moral judgment, and/or endorse remedies or improvements. On the other hand, "procedural frames suggest evaluations of political actors' legitimacy," in coverage that is more process-oriented, like poll result summaries. As McCombs described, attributes comprising a main theme are frames but not all attributes are frames. Framing looks at entire sets of traits that move beyond description to comprise a perspective. According to Entman (2004), frames that have the most cultural resonance, prominence, and repetition (frequency) have the most impact. As an example of foreign news impact, Inoue and Patterson (2007) found that various media frames about Japan affected Americans' perceptions of Japan. This article explores the attributes and frames associated with registration and absentee voting in the 2006 Mexican election, along with those dominant in each presidential candidate's coverage and in the overall election discourse.

Researchers have bemoaned the focus on elections as horse races or games rather than on election issues (Benoit, Stein, & Hensen, 2005; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Freedman & Fico, 2004). These approaches, of course, add conflict messages and highlight news drama (Patterson, 2000) but, as framing theorists would characterize it, result in more procedural frames rather than substantive frames. News about poll results has been used to explain voter opinion but also has fueled horse-race coverage and served to craft images consistent with the candidates' positions in the race (Patterson, 2005). Political communication scholars also have criticized candidate coverage for its negativity (Patterson, 2000).

In fact, studies show that coverage of presidential elections in the United States is more apt to personalize the news, concentrating on a candidate's character rather than vital election issues (Bennett, 2005). For example, in Benoit et al.'s (2005) content analysis of the New York Times coverage of U.S presidential elections from 1952 to 2000, they concluded that the discussion of the candidates' character was more common than discussion of their policy positions. Because of the symbiotic relationship between political campaigns and media, candidate image making has replaced discussion of political party issues (Bennett & Manheim, 2001; Sussman & Galizio, 2003). Our purpose was to see whether this orientation toward procedural frames, along with the tendency to portray negative attributes, would be found in news about elections taking place in other nations. Although there are studies of Mexican election coverage in Mexican media (Beltran, 2007), U.S. media framing of Latin American elections is understudied. Thus, along with the agenda-setting and framing research, the findings from the aforementioned election studies helped guide our research questions about political candidates and issues.

Although conceivably some day 10 million Mexicans in the United States could vote in a Mexican election, 2005–2006 Mexican pre-election coverage was more significant because of its possible effects on public policy more than on the ability to rouse Mexicans in the United States to vote. The "CNN effect" claiming direct effects on public policy has been widely disputed (Gilboa, 2005), but various processes have described the more subtle relationship between news content and political decision making (Entman, 2004; Graber, 2001). Framing of the 2006 presidential election could have affected immigration, trade, or other bilateral discussions under way in the 9 months of coverage studied in this article. In considering such political decision making, Entman's cascade model posits that frames spread through a process of cascading activation from political actors and other elites to the media and, via the media, to the public. Although it has a dominant "top-down" media effects appearance, Entman's model also diagrams the possibility of influential communication from the public to the media, and from media texts to political and societal elites. This highlights media's dual role as influenced and influencer.

In short, election coverage tends to be personalized, negative, and dramatic, which hinders the discussion of issues that voters and public policy makers need. The sum of these attributes can result in more procedural rather than substantive frames. Whether a foreign country's election makes it into the news most often depends on political and economic significance, along with cultural proximity and the financial ability of a newspaper to cover a foreign country. But how it is covered suggests its potential influence. Given the importance of Mexico to the United States and Western Hemisphere relations and the theoretical foundations in agenda setting and framing, we established the following research questions for the quantitative study:

RQ1: What were the dominant topics associated with coverage of 2006 Mexican pre-election news?
different edition of the same newspaper were examined.

And this scenario played out for non-presidential Mexican election campaigns:

Mexican presidential candidates, political parties, and media

Following Wagner and colleagues (Wagner, Pfeiffer, & Romer 2004) presidential, and gubernatorial campaigns, their findings suggest that the presidential campaigns

Several additional analyses were also conducted to assess the qualitative nature of the data.

Although qualitatively analytics would have been sufficient, for meaningful results we decided to use a probabilistic sample of 50 articles.

For the quantitative analysis we constructed a probabilistic sample of 50 articles.

(Kayser 2002) found that over 50,000 were published for the elections. These were not only political platforms but also social media interactions.

Two research questions were posed:

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- What were the attributes most often observed in the newspapers?

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the qualitative process the articles were read as a whole, beginning with our general research questions about issue and candidate attributes. A coder noted candidate and issue characteristics mentioned. This was the first stage of the constant comparative method, assigning data-texts to categories. In the second stage, integration and elaboration of properties, categories were reviewed for similarities and the context of the descriptors was compared. To reduce the data (third stage), these notes were sorted and prioritized for relevance to the research questions. A focus was on looking at how various traits were connected to each other (e.g., Keyton, 2004; Wester et al., 2004), which quantitative measurement of the frequency of attributes mentioned does not capture. Finally, exemplars were chosen to illustrate issue and candidate descriptions. As Lindlof described, exemplars help readers evaluate how plausible interpretations are and animate the author's voice (p. 268). To serve as a member check, the research team's third investigator read all of the articles in the qualitative sample to ensure agreement on categories and context. However, this did not extend to choosing exemplars; they were the prerogative of the primary coder.

RESULTS

Newspapers in states with large Latino populations—California, Texas, and New York—were most likely to cover the Mexican elections, with 30% of the coverage from California, 37% from Texas, and 12% from New York. About 64% of the newspaper coverage of the Mexico elections was in 4 of the 25 newspapers in the LexisNexis sample. Among the 161 articles, 21.7% were in the Houston Chronicle, 15.5% in the San Antonio Express-News, 15.5% in the Los Angeles Times, 11.2% in the San Diego Union-Tribune, 8.1% in the New York Times, 2.6% in the San Francisco Chronicle, and 2.5% in the Washington Post. The Christian Science Monitor, a national newspaper known for its international coverage, featured 3.7% of the election news and the Wall Street Journal had 3.1%. The remainder (16.1%) appeared in 16 papers. Three percent of the datelines were from the United States, 30.4% from Mexico City, 22.4% from elsewhere in Mexico, and 44.1% unspecified. In short, at least half the news was generated in Mexico and large papers in markets of sizeable Latino communities were most likely to cover the elections.

Our first research question examined the main topics in Mexican pre-election news. The leftist or populist shift throughout Latin America was referred to 44.7% of the time. This was the most dominant issue in all the articles and illustrates the substantive frame that defined the election as problematic to U.S.-Latin American relations. Although the topic was the Mexican election, Venezuela was mentioned in 19.9% of the coverage, Bolivia in 10.6% of the coverage, Brazil and Cuba each in 9.9%, Argentina in 7.5%, Nicaragua in 6.2%, Peru in 5.6%, and Colombia in 3%.

Past Mexican elections were mentioned in 40.4% and were the second most discussed topic. We ran correlation analyses (Pearson product moment correlations) with the dummy-coded variables to examine relationships. Mentions of past elections were associated with mentions of President Fox (r = .471, p < .05) and the PRI party (r = .596, p < .05). Other frequently noted topics were the Mexican economy in 39.8% of the articles, competition between candidates in 36.6%, and Mexican government corruption in 31.1% (50 articles). Among these 50 corruption articles, 31 specified corruption within a particular party, with 44% focused on the PRI, 12% on PRD, and 6% on PAN corruption.

Another construct of interest was news prominence, characterized by some researchers as a vital dimension of salience (e.g., Kiousis, 2004). The range of words in an article was 33 to 1956 with a mean of 584.7 words. Articles that appeared in the front section (Section A) or in the international/foreign section of the newspapers comprised 60.9% of the total articles, and more than one third of the articles (36.6%) were found between pages 1 and 3. When considering the three separate measures of prominence one can summarize that the coverage of the 2006 Mexican elections received was reasonably significant.4

The third research question dealt with coverage of expatriate voting and the three candidates. Twenty-nine percent of the stories discussed Mexican absentee ballots in the United States. Expatriate voting coverage did not necessarily correspond to discussion of candidates or the competition among them; there were slight inverse correlations between mentions of candidates and expatriate voting (r = -.255, p < .05) and between competition between candidates and expatriate voting (r = -.233, p < .05).

The fourth research question focused on frequency of coverage of presidential candidates, and associations with the candidates. Obrador received 59.6% of the coverage, followed by Calderón at 29.1% and Madrazo at 27.8%. President Vicente Fox received the same amount of attention as did Obrador, being referenced 59.6% of the time. When the

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4An index of prominence (length of article multiplied by page number) was calculated for use in bivariate analyses of the prominence of candidates and issues, but t tests did not discern any significance difference in the prominence of mentions versus nonmentions.

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3This method of coding is originally derived from Glaser and Strauss (1967).
candidates were mentioned, their parties tended to be noted, although this was less the case with López Obrador. For instance, relationships included Robert Madrazo and PRI (r = .740, p < .05), Felipe Calderón and PAN (r = .701, p < .05), and Andrés Manuel López Obrador and PRD (r = .594, p < .05). When there were references about the Mexican economy, Felipe Calderón was most likely to be mentioned (r = .444, p < .05) along with president Vincente Fox (r = .461, p < .05). When Obrador was mentioned, leftist/populism was likely to be noted (r = .511, p < .05) and Chavez mentions were significant (r = .180, p < .05). In addition, when President Bush was mentioned, reference to Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez (r = .539, p < .05) and Cuba’s Fidel Castro (r = .477, p < .05) were mentioned. These leaders served as symbolic oppositional figures to Bush.

In summary, these associations among mentions of leaders illustrate a portrayal of Latin American politicians entangled with one another. Madrazo and Calderón were more associated with their parties than was López Obrador. The Mexican election was framed as part of an overall Latin American trend rather than merely political machinations in one nation. If a paper covered it at all, Mexican pre-election coverage was fairly prominent and coverage focused on the candidate most opposed to U.S. capitalism, López Obrador.

Our fifth research question also examined the coverage through pre-January 15 and post-January 15 lenses. This was conducted because January 15, 2006, was the deadline for expatriate voter registration and we anticipated that pre-election coverage content might drop off after the deadline. However, there was no significant difference in the amount of pre- and post-January coverage devoted to expatriate voting.

Qualitative Analysis of Absentee Voting Coverage

Like the quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis focused on the issue descriptions along with the traits that framed the candidates in the U.S. press. U.S. newspaper coverage of the Mexican presidential election described the absentee voter drive as unsuccessful. Only 17,000 absentee-ballot applications were received before the deadline, and of those, only 10,000 had been received from those living in the United States (Berestein, 2006). U.S. newspapers blamed Mexican voter apathy that resulted from Mexico’s history of corruption, the complex application process, and the Mexican government’s inability to promote public awareness of the new election rules.

Many of the articles focused on Mexican corruption. According to the San Antonio Express-News, voters believed that corruption was still entrenched in Mexico’s electoral system (Schiller & Rozemberg, 2005). Others believed that their participation in Mexican politics wouldn’t alter the cronyism, bribery, voter intimidation that exists in Mexico (R. Johnson, 2006). In addition, reports said many undocumented workers “don’t trust anybody with their address in the U.S.” (Smith, 2006).

U.S. newspapers also cited the Mexican government’s inability to promote absentee balloting as a reason for voter apathy. In a January 2005 San Francisco Chronicle article, a Mexican living in the United States described her frustration with the public service announcements on Spanish-language television, “the TV just says 'Vote. It’s important to your country'. But we haven’t heard anything about how to get the ballot” (Hendricks, 2006). Another report said many Mexicans in the U.S. were “focused on bread-and-butter survival rather than on politics back home” (Hendricks, 2006). Therefore, “Mexico has diminished in importance for many immigrants as they raise families and settle into the workaday world north of the border” (Enriquez & Quinones, 2005), and this includes the politics of their homeland. Mexico’s laws prohibiting presidential candidates from campaigning abroad also isolated expatriate voters, according to journalists (Berestein & de la Vega, 2005; Enriquez & Quinones, 2005). Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the PRD candidate, had to cancel a planned campaign trip to Los Angeles in August 2005 after the decision to prevent foreign campaigning was made (Hendricks, 2005). Many immigrants felt snubbed by the campaign law, according to the press.

Newspapers also described the complex registration process as a hindrance to absentee voting. Those who lacked computer access couldn’t download the applications, and those without transportation could not pick them up at Mexican government offices. The applications also had to be sent to Mexico City by costly registered mail (Berestein, 2006). In addition, to obtain an absentee ballot, Mexico’s Federal Electoral Institute required a photocopy of the voter photo ID to be submitted along with a form and photocopies of utility receipts or other proof of a U.S. address. Because the voter IDs could be issued only in Mexico, immigrants who didn’t have the card or could not make it back to Mexico were out of luck (Ferriss, 2006). In short, rather than portrayed as an extension of democracy and symbol of inclusiveness, the absentee ballot initiative was described in a negative frame with apathy and corruption as dominant attributes.

Qualitative Analysis of the Three Major Candidates’ Coverage

As noted, for more than 75 years the PRI held power in Mexico, and the PRI candidate in the 2006 Mexican presidential election was Roberto Madrazo. U.S. newspapers coverage focused on his character and background. Madrazo was described as a “tenacious, smart and sometimes
ruthless strategist” (Althaus, 2006b). Readers were informed that his father was a PRI reformist who died in a plane crash. Trained as a lawyer and an urban planner, Madrazo had won the bitterly contested Tabasco gubernatorial race in 1994.

U.S. coverage focused on Madrazo’s negative attributes. An article in the *New York Times* (McKinley, 2006c) noted that Madrazo has little charisma. Furthermore, said the reporter, “on the campaign stages, he sometimes seems to shrink into his clothes and looks like an actor trying to play a physically larger person” (p. A8). In addition, U.S. newspapers tended to focus on Madrazo’s unpopular appeal, especially by including polls that noted his third-place position in the presidential race. According to some opinion polls cited, more than 40% of the Mexican public viewed Madrazo negatively. That was twice as high as the negative public perceptions of his main opponents (Althaus, 2006b).

Coverage of Madrazo also focused on corruption allegations in his past. His declared assets were challenged by foes. According to the news, allegations of Madrazo’s corruption also caused him to lose support among women voters (Tobar, 2006c). In addition, a November 28, 2005, *Los Angeles Times* article (Tobar & Sanchez, 2005) noted that vote-buying, excessive campaign spending, and backroom deal accusations were connected with his 1994 gubernatorial campaign. In summary, newspapers were most apt to recognize negative characteristics associated with PRI candidate Madrazo. He was framed as a corrupt extension of the PRI, and polls were cited as evidence that his prospects were dim.

Felipe Calderón was the presidential candidate of the center-right National Action Party or PAN, the party of the current president, Vicente Fox. Newspapers noted that Calderón was “likely to continue Fox’s program” (Schiller, 2006). According to reports, Calderón wanted to continue programs that provide housing for the poor financed with government credits, social security protection for the many Mexicans who don’t have a formal job, and financial aid for impoverished children’s education (Althaus, 2006a). In addition, Calderón promised to continue the free-trade policy of the Fox administration. He favored a flat tax on businesses and personal income to encourage foreign investment. In an attempt to curb crime and corruption, Calderón proposed setting up a single federal police force to replace the existing forces. He also wanted to give the local police the power to investigate crimes (McKinley, 2006b).

Despite including these issues, U.S. newspaper coverage of Calderón tended to focus on his character and background. Calderón is a Harvard graduate and a former energy minister in Fox’s administration. His father was one of the founders of PAN. As a Roman Catholic like Fox and 88% of Mexicans, Calderón promoted “family values” (Althaus, 2006a).

However, Mexico is a society that has historically struggled to curb the political power of the clergy, and articles were quick to emphasize that Calderón favored a separation of church and state. While campaigning, Calderón said, “I appreciate the values my parents instilled in me, but for me religion and politics are a completely distinct thing” (Althaus, 2006a). Calderón also positioned himself as a “principled, honest and incorruptible man” (McKinley, 2006b). On the campaign trail, he threw up his hands to show that they were “clean” of the stain of bribery (Tobar, 2006c). Furthermore, of the three candidates, he received the least amount of negative coverage in the qualitative analysis.

The third candidate in the 2006 Mexican presidential election was Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador represented the left-leaning Democratic Revolution Party, or PRD. In the articles reviewed, López Obrador was routinely referred to as “leftist” or “populist.” He is the son of a shopkeeper and started with the PRI before moving to the PRD (Tobar & Sanchez, 2005). He served as Mexico City’s mayor. Furthermore, most articles in the qualitative analysis described him as leading the presidential contest in the polls.

López Obrador’s policies were particularly appealing to Mexico’s poor majority, according to the newspapers. His main pledges were to expand public works projects and to provide free health care and cash subsidies to the elderly. López Obrador also said that he rejected an expensive media campaign in place of a grass-roots effort to galvanize voters (McKinley, 2005). He also promised to cut the salaries of top government officials and his own salary if president (McKinley, 2006a).

U.S. newspaper coverage of López Obrador portrayed his candidacy as the most likely to alter the existing relationship with the United States. López Obrador was reported to have said, “The next president of Mexico will not be a puppet of anyone.” This was a veiled suggestion that President Fox was too closely allied with Washington (McKinley, 2006a). Obrador also stated his desire to fight the exodus of manufacturing plants from Mexico to China that has resulted from greater free trade. In addition, he campaigned to delay the lifting of Mexican tariffs on corn and bean imports under NAFTA (Dibble, 2006).

Like Madrazo, López Obrador received negative coverage from U.S. newspapers. Several articles used the other candidates’ criticisms of López Obrador’s platform to frame him negatively. The other two candidates compared him to Hugo Chavez (McKinley, 2005; Tobar, 2006a). Regarding Chavez and López Obrador, Madrazo said “they have similar attitudes. I see authoritarianism in them both” (McKinley, 2005). Detractors such as Fox also called López Obrador a demagogue whose costly social programs could bankrupt Mexico (Dibble, 2006; Tobar, 2006a).
In summary, U.S. newspaper coverage of the Mexican presidential election often focused on negative attributes. As noted, coverage of absentee ballot voting highlighted corruption and coverage of López Obrador and Madrazo often referenced corruption or controversy in their past. Mexico's history of corruption and an ineffective bureaucracy were mentioned in several articles. Article titles such as "Expatriates Vote Apathy," "Faults Seen in Mexico's Democracy," and "The Winter of Mexican Voters' Discontent" reflected the negative tone prevalent in news included in the qualitative analysis.

DISCUSSION

The study contributes to the mass communication literature in extending second-level agenda setting and framing into the understudied Latin American context. In addition, the results support the literature on international news determinants and election news. Big-circulation papers with large Latino populations in the newspapers' markets (even when far from the border, like San Francisco) most often featured Mexican pre-election news. This reinforces that cultural proximity is a more relevant concept than geographic proximity in international news (M. A. Johnson, 1997). At the practical level it supports that newspapers are responsive to their newspaper markets in what news topics they select, even if how they report has bias or limitations.

The following is a discussion of how candidate attributes presented in the Results section are examples of second-level agenda setting and contribute to procedural frames. In addition, we describe the substantive framing of the absentee ballot initiative and the framing of the pre-election news. Suggestions are offered for an addition to one of the main framing models (Entman, 2004). Finally, we point to the significance of the findings for mass communication researchers.

Bilateral Issues in Election Coverage

As discussed earlier, U.S.–Mexican relations have been generally positive, and the two countries enjoy a strong economic relationship. However, U.S. newspaper coverage of the Mexican presidential election seldom touched on major bilateral issues such as trade and migration, even when they were relevant to the story. In addition, articles rarely focused on the negative aspects of NAFTA on Mexico's economy except when referenced in coverage of López Obrador. Political communication researchers lament the dearth of issues in domestic election news, but issue inclusion may be even more important in foreign election news because other communication channels like political advertising, interpersonal communication, or organizational communication may not be available to supplement media the way they do in domestic contexts (although Internet news would be used in both, depending on voter demographics).

Candidate Focus

As predicted by prior election research, the election horse race was a main theme and character attributes, not policy, were more often featured (Bennett, 2005; Benoit et al., 2005; Patterson, 2005; Sussman & Galizio, 2003). Coverage of each candidate tended to focus on his character or his poll position, clear markers of procedural frames. In almost every article about a candidate in the qualitative analysis, polls were referenced to describe the candidates' position in the race. Their personal history or previous political roles were included in several articles, but little space was devoted to the political parties or their platforms except for those of López Obrador. Coverage of Felipe Calderón often described his policy as an extension of Vicente Fox's agenda. Coverage of Roberto Madrazo focused on his third-place standing or on accusations of corruption. However, Andrés Manuel López Obrador's policies were often highlighted, perhaps because they received negative criticism from the other candidates, allowing them to help set the "attribute agenda" and insert conflict into the articles. In addition, López Obrador's policy specifics were used in a context to explain his leftist or populist orientation.

The election horse race was the center of the procedural frame. Through the scope of procedural framing the political candidates' legitimacy varied greatly. Madrazo's legitimacy as a candidate was relinquished throughout much of the election coverage. He was repeatedly referred to as trailing the other presidential aspirants and associated with corrupt activities and a corrupt party.

As outlined earlier, substantive frames define conditions as problematic, identify causes, convey a moral judgment, and endorse remedies (Entman, 1993). In this case, the Mexican absentee ballot issue was framed as a problem and an extension of a dysfunctional Mexico. Although U.S. Iraqis have been lauded for absentee voting, citizens of a more evolved democracy like Mexico were not afforded enthusiastic news coverage of their participation in the political process. In terms of blame, absentee balloting articles mentioned Mexican government corruption although corruption was not necessarily salient to the ballot registration process. Almost 94% of absentee ballot articles referred to low numbers of registered voters and apathy was
cited. This moral judgment of Mexicans also resonates with negative ethnic stereotypes in the United States (M. A. Johnson, 1999) that portray Latinos as passive. In addition, it is possible that in their tendency to portray expatriate voting as a problem, the newspapers may have reflected their communities' disapproving sentiments toward immigrants. For instance, a recent poll in a state where there has been a large Mexican influx found that only 3.3% of the respondents said they would like it if a Hispanic moved into their neighborhood, and 47.3% of the respondents thought growth of Hispanics in their state was bad. The repeated inability to pass 21st-century legislation offering worker rights and/or amnesty to Mexican migrant workers is another indicator of anti-immigration sentiment.

Of interest, the expatriate voting articles did not offer remedies for the problems. Entman (2004) noted that international events can be more ambiguous, and other research has described lack of reporters' knowledge about other nations. Thus, it is a possibility that international news frames are less likely to include solutions.

The second substantive frame dealt with overall pre-election coverage. The dominant window on the news was hemispheric relations rather than bilateral relations. Latin American populism and leftist presidential candidates were framed as problems for the United States. Newspapers emphasized that a López Obrador win would increase tensions in U.S.-Latin American relations. Although true populist groundswells emerge out of inequality and lack of fairly distributed resources, the "sources" of populism were media icons like Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, according to the news framing. In short, individuals were blamed for tensions, rather than historical, structural, or social factors. Associating Mexican leftist movements with leaders like Chavez helped to offer a negative moral judgment on leftist policies, parties, or candidates. It also suggested the cynicism that observers associate with Mexico's former ruling party PRI. In addition, López Obrador's opponents assisted in negative framing of populism by pairing it with the pejorative "authoritarianism," particularly ironic when coming from the PRI candidate. If a solution was suggested it was Calderón, who would continue with PAN policies. The conservative, pro-business PAN party resonated better with the U.S. political and business goals at the time.

Related to this was the economic tilt of the coverage. In the last 2 decades, Mexico has moved to neo-liberal policies under presidents Salinas, Zedillo, and Fox, which has benefited U.S. businesses. In news coverage, a downward shift in neo-liberal economic policies was conveyed as potentially hazardous to economic security in the United States. Coverage suggested fear and a loss of control for the United States, perhaps an extension of 2005–06 U.S. concerns about an economic downturn, and the political and economic costs of the Iraq war. Of course, the U.S. decline of Western Hemisphere financial status has some factual basis, in that Latin American countries have been reaching beyond the United States for trade partners. Latin America's increased trade agreements with China are of particular interest (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2005). In summary, the Mexican election's impact on the U.S. wallet carried clout in the coverage. This suggests that Entman's cascade model might include a more prominent mention of business elites (e.g., Entman, 2004, p. 10) than it currently offers (although as noted earlier, he combines business leaders with other elites who can influence policy makers and media). We offer that business pressure on politicians and direct business-media relations via public relations (e.g., Manheim, 2001) warrant more recognition and analysis in framing studies, even when the topic is political.

Limitations

One limitation in this study is the cross-sectional design and one-country case. Another is the sample size, an inevitable challenge when researching Latin America in U.S. media because international news comprises a small percentage of the news. A third is that analysis was limited to English-language newspapers. Using the database Ethnic NewsWatch, we found only a handful of Mexican election articles in U.S. ethnic newspapers. We did not have access to a better sampling frame at the time of the study to provide a large-enough Spanish-language sample for comparison purposes. Fourth, although dichotomous variables were dummy-coded to allow for parametric analysis, we would suggest more interval measures of attributes in future code sheets, perhaps using semantic differential scales. Fifth, no extra-media variables are included. Longitudinal studies of several elections or multiple news topics supplemented by policy data, polls, registration numbers, or voter data are suggested for future research.

Scholars have provided evidence that U.S. media coverage of elections tends to focus on drama rather than issues (Grayson, 1998), and the 2006 Mexican pre-election coverage in U.S. newspapers substantiates the argument that this is a typical approach for international elections, too. Our findings extended beyond second-level agenda setting attributes into procedural and substantive frames, lending credence to the fact that these are compatible theoretical approaches for future studies. However, newspapers more typically focused on blame and displayed a bias that resonated with U.S. morals, rather than on solutions. This suggests that, at least in

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2This was a 2007 poll among North Carolinians (Center for Research in Journalism and Mass Communication, 2007).
international news, this fourth “solution step” in the framing process may not always be present. In addition, the fear of leftist politics was a dominant frame that resonated not only with the current administration but with U.S. business interests. Again, this suggests that business elites, decisions, and corporate trends should receive more attention in political framing studies. In summary, although the presence of Mexican affairs in U.S. papers is on the rise (Grayson, 1998), much information is not useful for voters or policymakers. Mexican election coverage in the future will be vital not only for immigrants from Mexico who will be expatriate voters but also for U.S. citizens who can influence bilateral policy. At the practical level, the authors are confident that more understanding of how other nations’ elections have been covered will improve international and political reporting in the United States.

REFERENCES


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