

Women Political Candidates and the News Media:
The Case of Irene Sáez

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When Irene Sáez announced her bid for the presidency of Venezuela in early 1998, she led in the polls, ahead of a dozen male competitors. A former Miss Universe, Sáez had garnered support as mayor of the municipality of Chacao in greater Caracas, and had gained a reputation for being an honest and efficient politician. Twelve months later, Sáez finished a very distant third in the December 6 elections, garnering only 3.1 percent of the vote.

This paper proposes that the news media contributed to Sáez's overwhelming decline in the polls over those eleven months—though I do not suggest that this was the decisive reason for her failure. Rather than the amount of media attention that Sáez received, it was the type of attention that the media focused on her that ultimately discredited her campaign. The role that the media may have played in discrediting Sáez's presidential bid, however, has been largely ignored. Newspapers in the United States rarely failed to mention the candidate's youth and enjoyed referring to her as a five-foot-ten strawberry blonde.¹ Andres Galdo, a columnist for the Venezuelan daily El Nacional, wrote of Sáez, "Irene passes her time constantly changing her clothes, her hairdo, her make-up. She hasn't been able to come up with a single idea that could impress voters" (AP). Braden in Women Politicians and the Media argues that, "It's better to be portrayed as a novelty than not to be mentioned at all, and the news media play an important role in whether a candidate gets noticed in the first place. One of the worst things that can happen to a politician is to receive little or no media coverage" (Braden, 2). However, Pippa Norris has instead argued that journalists' preoccupation "with the attire and hair styles of women candidates instead of their issue positions" discourages women from running for office and discourages voters from taking women seriously (Norris, 65).

Virtually no scholarly attention has focused on the relationship between Latin American women political candidates and the news media. As women continue to make political gains in the region, however, the need to analyze this relationship becomes more pressing.² Indeed, even in the United States little attention has focused on the interaction between the news media and female candidates; and instead, what is known about the treatment of female candidates by the media is largely anecdotal (Darcy et al, 72). Comments by Pat Schroeder to the National Women's Political Caucus in 1973 are typical: "Because you are a woman you may have the ability to gain more than your fair share of press and media coverage, because you are the different candidate. But the other side of the coin is that you will often be more severely cross-examined on your views and statements by news people than is the average male candidate" (Braden, 64). Researchers are divided as to the truth of Schroeder's statement—some instead argue that women running for office receive less media attention than their male counterparts. The case of Irene Sáez certainly suggests that Schroeder's statement is more accurate; women candidates become "newsworthy" simply because they are *women* candidates. Braden asserts that it is better for women candidates to get media recognition that is based not on their issue positions or platforms, but rather on their gender than not to receive news coverage at all, which is "what often happens to women candidates, especially if they're newcomers" (Braden, 2). Though any media attention at all is better than none, focusing on gender rather than issue

¹ A study by Ann Bowman found that for women candidates, physical beauty is negatively associated with electability, while the opposite is true for men. If interested, see Bowman's article, "Physical Attractiveness and Electability: Looks and Votes."

² Gender quota laws—which have been passed in ten Latin American countries—prescribe the percentage of candidates on party lists that must be women. These laws have thus far proved remarkably unsuccessful (except in the case of Argentina). The media's function may help explain the high percentage of women candidates but relatively low percentage of women elected to those offices.

related coverage in a woman's campaign discourages voters from taking women seriously as political contenders.

Although media coverage can make or break a candidate, the perception among possible candidates of the role that media plays is a valid secondary consideration. As Norris explains, "While women candidates may not be aware of systematic studies documenting gender bias in news coverage, they are likely to be familiar with anecdotal stories describing reporters as preoccupied with the attire and hair styles of women candidates instead of their issue positions" (Norris, 65). Real or imagined, the media's unfavorable treatment of women may prevent qualified individuals from running for political office.

While women have certainly been underrepresented in government, particularly in its uppermost echelons, the desire to study this phenomenon underscores its normative importance. Would women's equal political representation affect Latin American politics? Verba believes that women's increasing political participation has certainly had an effect on American politics. According to Verba, "Governmental programs and priorities change as a group becomes more involved and active in politics, and as the members or leaders of the group develop a consciousness of their joint interests and articulate those joint interests as demands for governmental response" (Verba, 556). Numerous studies in the U.S. have shown that women in office and those running for office, from both major parties, back feminist policies and ideals in greater percentages than their male colleagues (Clark, 100; Darcy et al, 12). Mireya Moscoso, elected president of Panama in 1999 and currently holding office, professed a commitment to increasing women's representation in her own government. During her campaign, Moscoso stated, "Some men in Panama have this idea that women are weak and lack the courage to make decisions, but after these elections even [opposition candidate] Martín Torrijos will have to recognize that society has changed³" (*La Prensa*, 4/30/99). No study has yet been undertaken to determine whether Moscoso has actually included a greater proportion of women in her government than her predecessors. During her presidential bid, Irene Sáez emphasized her commitment to increased female participation in government and to feminist ideals. Sáez, in a conference entitled *Commitment to Women*, promised that if elected president, her administration would boast unprecedented numbers of women, spoke enthusiastically about recent statistics indicating that women now represented 50 percent of Venezuelan voters, and reiterated her support for a traditionally feminist issue, domestic violence legislation (*El Universal*, 8/16/98).

More theoretical arguments for greater female representation in government focus on theories of descriptive representation. When any group of citizens, be they women or members of minority ethnic or religious groups, are excluded from representation in government, this affects public policy decisions and influences political outcomes (Clark, 99). Equally important is the legitimizing effect that equal representation has on government (Darcy et al, 13). As explained by Darcy et al, a further consideration highlights women's separate social spheres—as homemakers and mothers—and their different areas of expertise—traditionally thought of as children's welfare and childcare policy, health care, education, and environmental policy (Darcy et al, 12; Nelson and Chowdhury, 10). A fresh argument for increased female representation comes from Darcy et al who argue that society will more generally benefit from the greater competition that will result from a more female-friendly political atmosphere. The quality of our representatives, they argue, will increase because of this intensified level of competition (Darcy et al, 13). Perhaps more important is Brill's observation that, "A public woman is one of the most crucial weapons we have in the war against stereotype and gender bias because it is a

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

fundamental challenge to the assumptions about gender organization and sex-role assignment” (Brill, 2).

Although the scarcity of women politicians is easily agreed upon, the reasons for this lack of female political representation are highly controversial. One scholar, Robert Bernstein, argues that women simply do not have political ambition (Darcy et al, 72)—a claim that can have little validity in the face of unprecedented numbers of women running for and attaining public office. Maurice Duverger, in his seminal work, argued for the male conspiracy explanation for female underrepresentation in politics (Darcy et al, 20). Far more convincing arguments have focused on sex-segregation in the occupations that typically produce politicians, sex-role stereotyping on the part of voters, the incumbency advantage, the paucity of female candidates, a lack of political resources on the part of women, and attitudinal barriers from (traditionally male) party leaders and elites (Duke, 107; Randall, 92-95; Kahn and Goldenberg, 181b). Certainly in the far more developed American literature on women in politics, these factors have heavily disadvantaged women and have contributed to the low percentages of women in political office; the little research that has been done on this in the Latin American context seems to suggest that these same factors are salient there.

Darcy et al propose that, “If our political system needs women—and we have argued that this is the case—and if our system has demonstrably failed to include these women, as it clearly has, it is the political system that needs to be blamed, not the women” (Darcy et al, 92). In their urgency to explain why the “increase in the number of winning women candidates has not really kept pace with the increased number of candidates,” Darcy et al neglect an explanation which has been virtually ignored by this field of scholarship—that the news media may “play a role in influencing the success of female candidates” (Kahn and Goldenberg, 181b). The necessity of analyzing the impact of the media on this phenomenon is clear.

Once women do decide to pursue public office, the news media may focus the sort of negative attention on their campaigns that could hinder or injure their candidacies. Braden explains, “When the news media imply that women are anomalies in high public office, the public is likely to regard them as bench warmers rather than as an integral part of government” (Braden, 2). As Kenney argues, “If ‘lawyer’ or ‘legislator’ or ‘diplomat’ contain within them the stated assumption that the occupant of that role is a man (hence the need for the marked designation of ‘lady MP’) the very meaning of the role itself is defined in opposition to women” (Kenney, 459). This may be especially relevant in Latin America, where gendered language can reinforce, if not force, gendered thinking. When Isabel Perón became the first woman president of a Spanish-speaking country, the press had a difficult time deciding on a proper title before finally settling on *La Presidente*. The type of attention that the news media lends to female candidates may reinforce public sentiments about the inability of women to hold political office and thus undermine their likelihood of winning office.

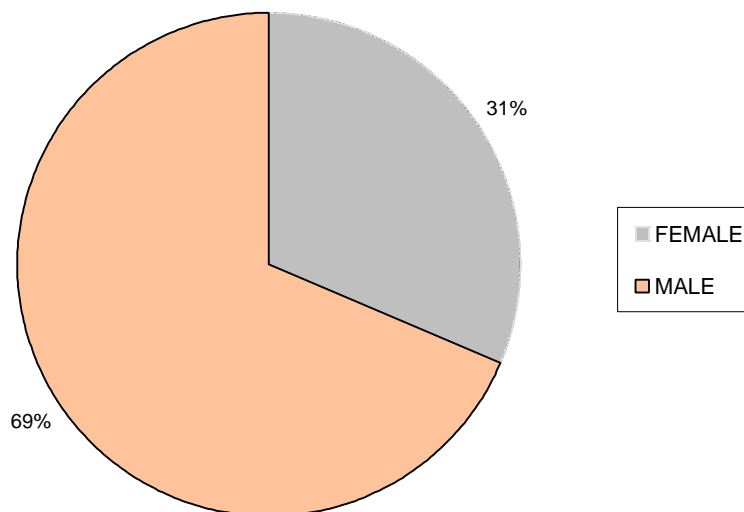
The gender composition of the media sources may influence the content of the news. Kahn and Goldenberg’s 1991 study found that female journalists gave women political candidates in the United States more positive news coverage. Women reporters are also more likely to focus on traditionally “female” issues (Kahn and Goldenberg, 110-111a). For this reason, Kahn and Goldenberg urge more equal representation not only in the nation’s political bodies, but also across the country’s newsrooms. Kenney argues that, “To understand how institutions are gendered, we must first know the proportion of women—are they tokens or minorities, or at parity?” (Kenney, 457). Recent data show that in the United States women make up only one-third of all journalists, and that they are more severely underrepresented in the

more influential positions in the profession (Weaver, 21). My own analysis revealed that slightly over 31 percent of the articles analyzed for this research project were written by women.⁴ However, regional data on the percentage of women in the news media has not been compiled, though some countries do have associations of women in journalism which may compile that sort of information (Montgomery: Cole, 39). In the late 1980s in Venezuela, a woman, Alba Sanchez, became editor-in-chief of *El Nacional*, one of the nation's two largest newspapers (Montgomery: Cole, 47); previously women had been editors of smaller, regional newspapers.

Just how much of a difference do the media make today? According to Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, "The media help to establish the parameters which structure public thinking about the social world. Media practitioners are heavily involved in gatekeeping public access to information, with a judicious editing decision here, the selection of a particular image there" (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 114). Traditional "standards of newsworthiness" may advantage female political candidates, who (still seen as rarities) may be perceived as worthy of more media coverage than male candidates for office (Kahn, 155).

The power that the media wield derives from their agenda-setting capabilities. Iyengar and Kinder, in *News that Matters*, propose that ordinary citizens must rely on information provided by

GRAPH 1: GENDER MAKEUP OF JOURNALISTS



the mass media. This dependence gives the media the ability to set the agenda; the issues that receive the most media coverage are perceived by the public as the most important issues (Iyengar and Kinder, 16). Although their conclusions concerning agenda-setting were based on experiments of television news coverage, their theory is easily generalizable to the other media. In their work on female candidates and the media, Kahn and Goldenberg emphasize the media's agenda-setting powers; they argue that if the media devote considerable attention to the

⁴ Please refer to Graph 1 for a breakdown of these figures. Country-specific data on the gender breakdown of journalists would also be useful.

“horserace”—by which they mean coverage of the polls—then candidate viability becomes more salient (Kahn and Goldenberg, 187b). Kahn and Goldenberg’s own research suggests that this is the case. By focusing excessive attention on the horserace, the media may influence the outcome of the election. In *The People’s Choice*, Lazarsfeld et al explain that voters tend to vote for the candidate they expect to win (Lazarsfeld et al, 108). This “bandwagon effect” could disadvantage women candidates who are, according to research by Kahn and Goldenberg, more likely to lag behind male candidates in the horserace (Kahn and Goldenberg, 187b). The media’s coverage of the position of women candidates in the horserace encourages voters to vote for more viable candidates.

Candidate evaluations are based on a number of factors, including party identification, issues, candidate personality, and candidate viability (Kahn, 155). The news media may not be capable of telling voters what to think, but they certainly have the power to tell them what to think about. In addition to their agenda-setting capabilities, the news media “frame” campaigns for voters by arranging “key concepts, stock phrases, and stereotyped images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments” (Norris, 275). As Norris explains, this gives the media power to guide the interpretation of new developments and reinforce traditional views (Norris, 275).

Quantitative studies in the United States have revealed that journalists give female candidates less press coverage than they give their male counterparts. Research by Kahn and Goldenberg on 28 Senate races in the mid-1980s found that stories about male candidates were longer than stories about female candidates, and that women’s issue positions were covered in less depth (Kahn and Goldenberg, 190b).⁵ Further research by these scholars shows that coverage of women candidates focuses on the horserace—27 percent of articles about women versus only 21 percent of articles on men do this (Kahn and Goldenberg, 188b). Although women receive more horserace coverage, Kahn and Goldenberg note that male candidates receive more issue coverage: 3.7 paragraphs a day versus 2.9 paragraphs a day, for men and women respectively (Kahn and Goldenberg, 110a). In the same study, they find that a paucity of resources, including financial obstacles and a lack of endorsements, is more frequently reported for female candidates than for male candidates; while dismal resources are mentioned five percent of the time in coverage of male candidates, for female candidates, over 10 percent of articles mention a lack of resources (Kahn and Goldenberg, 190b; Kahn and Goldenberg, 109a).

Issue coverage, Kahn and Goldenberg assert, differs based on the gender of candidates. In their study of the U.S. Senate, they found that 40 percent of women’s issue coverage represents traditional “female” issues, but only 30 percent of male coverage is devoted to these same issues (Kahn and Goldenberg, 110a). The focus on female issues may advantage women candidates since “media coverage affects the salience of issues for the public, voters exposed to races with female candidates may come to believe that female issues are important and these female issues, because they are more salient, may be used when voters evaluate the candidates” (Kahn and Goldenberg, 110-111a). An increase in the percentage or number of women journalists would improve women’s chances of gaining elective office because women reporters more often focus on female issues (Kahn and Goldenberg, 111a) and thereby increase the salience of these issues.

According to Kahn and Goldenberg, “Reporters routinely rate women candidates as less viable than their male counterparts and devote more space to discussing negative campaign

⁵ Kahn’s study on senatorial and gubernatorial races, however, found that differences in media coverage were not statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level.

resources, such as a lack of endorsements or lack of campaign funding, for women candidates (Kahn and Goldenberg, 109a). Repeatedly they stress that this negative coverage, the scarcity of issue attention, and the importance given to the horserace may encourage voters to focus on political viability and vote against female candidates (Kahn and Goldenberg, 191b; Kahn and Goldenberg, 109a). Based on these conclusions, Kahn and Goldenberg assert that “the press may act as a roadblock for women in their quest for elective office” because “the amount of coverage a candidate receives is related to the voter’s recognition of that candidate, gender differences in press attention can be consequential” (Kahn and Goldenberg, 109a; Kahn and Goldenberg, 185b).

The 1998 Elections

Democracy, once the “expected and customary state of affairs” in Venezuela, began to deteriorate in 1988 with the election of Carlos Andres Perez to the presidency (Levine, 247). Perez had reigned over Venezuela during the oil rich days of the late 1970s, and Venezuelans mistakenly appeared to have believed that returning Perez to the presidency would bring back those prosperous times (Coppedge: Linz and Valenzuela, 341). Perez’s unexpected reforms that included drastic market liberalization and unannounced price hikes led to mass rioting and looting, and over three hundred deaths (Friedman, 89; Naim, 10).

Hugo Chávez Frias gained national attention on February 4, 1992 when he co-led a coup attempt against President Carlos Andres Perez; in his nationally broadcast and now famous *por ahora* speech, Chávez asked rebel troops in the interior of the country to lay down their arms, accepted personal responsibility for the coup, and implied that while his group’s objectives had failed “for now” Venezuela would soon be undergoing political change (Naim, 99; El Universal). In Paper Tigers and Minotaurs, Moises Naim writes of that live television message: “He was a compelling and uncommon sight for television viewers accustomed to the verbal and political maneuverings of traditional politicians: a public figure who acknowledged that he personally had failed while others had done a great job; who maintained an unfaltering position even after failure and defeat; who faced responsibility and did not try to evade the repercussions of his action. His televised image conveyed the possibility of change, a break from the political and economic schemes usually blamed for the country’s problems. A new face unrelated to the traditional power structures and offering to guide the nation back to prosperity, equality, and integrity was an item that, regardless of its packaging, was bound to appeal to a mass audience” (Naim, 102).

The appeal was evident more than six years later on December 6, 1998, when Venezuelans elected Chávez to the nation’s highest office with nearly 57 percent of the vote. As Norden explains, “The leaders of the coup, particularly the charismatic Chávez, were lauded as heroes, long-awaited knights who had come to rescue Venezuelans from a stagnating system. Polls taken immediately after the attempt demonstrated that nearly half of the population believed that a military coup (but not necessarily a military regime) might make things better” (Norden, 155).

That first coup attempt was followed by another in November of the same year by factions within the air force, and though the sight of low flying military aircraft in downtown Caracas was daunting, this coup attempt too failed (Naim, 10). In May of 1993, with national elections quickly approaching, Perez was forced from office by a corruption scandal that ended with his impeachment (Friedman, 89). After 40 years of stable democracy, Venezuelans were disgruntled with a system they perceived as corrupt, and hostile towards politicians. The two

major parties, Accion Democratica (AD) and Comité Organizado por Elecciones Independientes (COPEI), which had exchanged power for 40 years in democratic elections⁶, were discredited (Levine: Diamond et al, 260). Thus, the elections of 1998 were dominated by three independents: Hugo Chávez, Irene Sáez, and Henrique Salas Römer.⁷

Chávez, pardoned by President Rafael Caldera for his actions in February of 1992, appealed to millions of Venezuelans who were tired of *politics as usual*, and wanted an end to a corrupt system. Democratic watch dogs worried that Chávez's calls for a constituent assembly that could disband Congress and veiled threats against political opponents signaled an end to one of Latin America's most enduring democracies.⁸ Promises by his Movimiento V Republica (MVR) and the Patriotic Pole coalition to stop the free market reforms that the Perez administration had put in place increased support for Chávez among the poor, who had seen drastic drops in their living standard over the last decade. Chávez's economic platform, which included a moratorium on debt payments and a re-nationalization of key industries, caused a panic among the international financial community and decreased investments in the nation during 1998.

Businessman Henrique Salas Römer, who finished second in the elections with 39.5 percent of the vote, had earned political respect as an independent governor from the industrial state of Carabobo, but initially in the campaign suffered from a lack of name recognition—a problem that neither Sáez nor Chávez faced.⁹ Salas Römer ran for the presidency under his own Proyecto Venezuela party label.

Though Irene Sáez initially came to national prominence as the winner of the 1981 Miss Universe pageant,¹⁰ she gained respect as mayor of Chacao, the richest municipality in the country and one of five municipalities that make up the city of Caracas. Sáez initially forged an independent campaign and ran under the IRENE party, an acronym formed by the words *integración, representación, and nueva esperanza*. COPEI, encouraged by extreme public support for Sáez, picked up Sáez as their own candidate. Shortly before the election, Sáez agreed to a coalition with AD, the country's other major party. According to political commentators, Sáez slipped in the polls because of her associations with the two powerful parties, a volatile staff, and “sugary” campaign slogans. Sáez's *Changing Venezuela* platform called for an end to corruption, avoidance of a currency devaluation, a declaration of a state emergency in education, a reduction in the size of the national bureaucracy, and a refinancing of the public debt (El Universal). Sáez lost her substantial lead in the polls by April of 1998 to Chávez, and was soon surpassed in the polls by Salas Römer. A poll commissioned by El Universal asked respondents why they would not vote for Sáez. Nearly 47 percent of the respondents indicated that Sáez lacked experience. As Sandy Tucci wrote, “I feel no

⁶ The power that AD and COPEI had was undeniable, and led to the labeling of Venezuelan democracy as a partyarchy. “Some say even beauty contests were decided along party lines!” (Coppedge in Linz and Valenzuela, 328).

⁷ The minor candidates in this election were: Claudio Fermin, Luis Alfaro Lucero, Gonzalo Pérez Hernández, Godofredo Marín, Ignacio Quintana, Radamés Muñoz León, Oswaldo Suju Raffa, Miguel Rodríguez, and Alejandro Peña Esclusa.

⁸ Prior to the most recent constituent assembly, suggested by Chávez during the campaign and voted into existence in 1999, Venezuela had had 26 such assemblies, but none in nearly 40 years.

⁹ Orren and Polsby write, “First, the only advantage of being well known is that it gets you over the hurdles of name recognition and viability, but it will then vex you as some newcomer temporarily captures the imagination of the public” (Orren and Polsby, 184). Salas Römer was never able to do this.

¹⁰ Professor Rafael de la Cruz, one of Sáez's campaign managers and the program coordinator for an eventual government, stated that Sáez's name recognition rates reached 98 percent (Personal Interview, 7/23/99).

apprehension in saying that Irene Sáez is a great woman, whom I admire profoundly, and without envy. She has already won a place in Venezuelan history and I would be pleased to give her my vote, but not now” (*El Universal*, 10/21/98). Another 28 percent said that they disapproved of her alliance with COPEI.¹¹ Almost 11 percent of respondents reported that they believed Sáez lacked the determination and fortitude to confront the current crisis. According to 4.5 percent of those polled, Sáez’s economic policies would only benefit the business community.

Sáez’s association with COPEI signaled her drastic drop in the polls; her union with COPEI and particularly her debate with Eduardo Fernandez for COPEI sponsorship—which was perceived by many as a submission to the party will—discredited her status as an independent, although Sáez had received backing from both COPEI and AD during her mayoral runs and still maintained her identity as an independent.¹² According to members of her campaign team, Sáez believed that the voters would think of her as an independent, just as they had when the two major parties had made her their mayoral candidate in Chacao, despite her affiliation with the parties.¹³ Her association with AD before the November national elections further tarnished her image as an independent. After her decline in the polls, both parties rescinded their support and ultimately backed Salas Römer in an effort to keep the presidency from Chávez, the obvious front-runner.¹⁴ Despite her unexpectedly renewed status as an independent in the last weeks of November, Sáez remained in the race, stating: “Irene Sáez will not give up, I will keep fighting to show that the women of this country have strength” (*El Universal*, 11/23/98). Two opinion pieces during the last week of November stated that Sáez would win the respect of the nation if she were to withdraw from the race, and thus increase Salas Römer’s chances of winning the presidency.

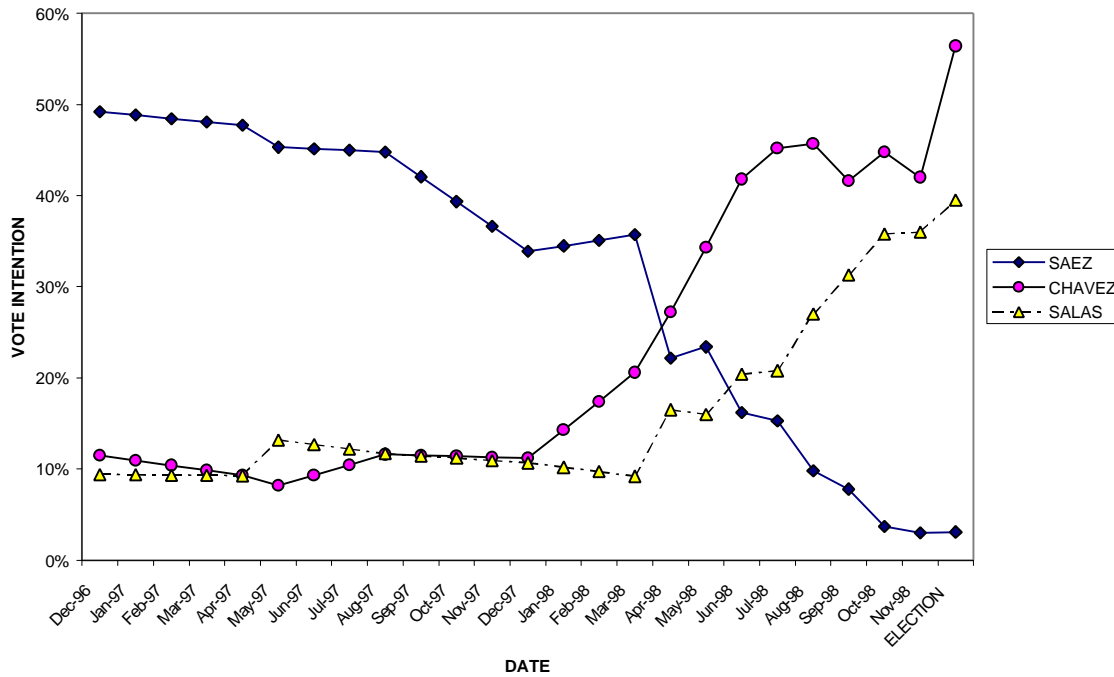
¹¹ Alvaro Miranda, in an article written for *El Universal* articulated what many others perceived; he wrote: “Adecos and copeyanos will attempt to fix all that has been broken over the last forty years, sacrificing the beauty of Chacao, who will make her path in the December 6 elections, as she once did in the Nuevo Circo during the Press Meeting” (*El Universal*, 11/23/98). Newspaper articles were uniform in their belief that the alliance with COPEI and AD would only harm Sáez and that the two major parties were using the candidate in a desperate attempt to retain control of the government.

¹² According to de la Cruz, Sáez’s campaign team commissioned polls to decide the question of affiliation with COPEI and found that Sáez would suffer a 28 percent drop in popularity if she was supported by COPEI and about a 19 percent drop if she was given support by AD. As the election neared, more and more voters said that they would not vote for Sáez if she were affiliated with COPEI. Although Sáez had received support from both COPEI and AD during her mayoral campaigns and still was perceived as independent, the voters were unwilling to believe (despite her assertions to the contrary) that she would be able to maintain her independency if affiliated with COPEI. According to de la Cruz, this was partly an issue of sexism. Many male voters believed that as a woman Sáez would be unable to stand firm against the COPEI leadership. This was especially true of males between the ages of 25 and 45, whose support for Irene dropped most substantially after she was adopted by COPEI (Personal Interview, 7/23/99).

¹³ According to Leonardo Vivas, a member of Sáez’s campaign team, Sáez would have been a “perfect candidate for 1997” but unfortunately the national mood had changed, and affiliation with either of the major parties was no longer an asset (Personal Interview, 9/29/00).

¹⁴ Please refer to Graph 2 and note that data for 1/97-3/97, 6/97-7/97, 9/97-11/97, 1/98-2/98 was interpolated.

A LOOK AT THE HORSERACE



She's Not My Type of Blonde: A Qualitative Analysis

Though the days when newspapers carried headlines about the *Sweetheart in the Senate* may have ended in the United States, women continue to receive different treatment from the media than male candidates (Duke, 104). In *Women Politicians and the Media*, Braden questions just how far the American media has come. She writes: “Perhaps it was to be expected that reporters in 1916 would ask Jeanette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress, how she liked having an office across from an eligible bachelor. But it’s harder to understand why journalists continue to ask inane questions that trivialize and stereotype women politicians” (Braden, 1). Braden’s question holds particular relevance in Venezuela where Irene Sáez’s presidential bid was distinguished in the media by inappropriate and irrelevant comments about the presidential contender’s hair, weight, clothing, and beauty.

Columnist Ibsen Martinez announced that he would not vote for Sáez “because she’s not my type of blonde” (*El Universal*, 7/15/98). Omar Estacio, in a piece for *El Universal* wrote, “Hector Alonso Lopez said it last week: the mustache, the eyebrows, but more than anything the double chin of ex-president Herrera Campins have begun to show on the face of Irene Sáez” (1/12/98). While Chávez was frequently addressed as the Coup Candidate or the Candidate of the Red Beret, Sáez was referred to as a Barbie doll, as an ex-Miss Universe, and, in a column by Marta Colomina, as Miss Narcissist. Easy comparisons were made to both Eva and Isabel Perón, especially after Sáez adopted a hairstyle that resembled Eva Perón’s. One columnist referred to the presidential contender as “the girl whom every man dreamt of sleeping with once” (*El Universal*, 6/27/98). In a reference to Noemí Sanín and María Emma Mejía of Colombia and writing of Sáez’s electoral chances, Adolfo Saguero asked, “Why should it be different for the Barbie of Chacao, who does not even have the image, steadiness, or experience of her Colombian colleagues?” (*El Universal*, 7/25/98). In one of her pieces, Elvia Gomez quoted

Marcial Mendoza Estrella, president of the IRE party, who commented that Sáez is “a beautiful 37 year old woman who could once again compete in a beauty pageant, but should not run for the Presidency of the Republic” (El Universal, 7/15/98).

More startling was the fact that these references were not limited to the opinion section of the newspaper. Luisana Colomine, the El Universal reporter assigned to cover Sáez’s presidential campaign, asked the candidate about her hairstyle in a May 13 news article (El Universal, 5/13/98). Earlier that week, Colomine had written of Sáez, “Again, the hairstyle mimicking Evita’s, dressed in black, much to classically for the festive, informal environment” (El Universal, 5/10/98). Jose Vicente Rangel entitled one of his columns *The Hairstyle* (El Universal, 5/17/98). Colomine did not restrict her criticism to Sáez’s personal grooming; she introduced a quote by the candidate with the following clause: “With that habit of referring to herself in the third person, as if it wasn’t about her...” (El Universal, 11/13/98).¹⁵

Articles emphasized the candidate’s gender. One news article co-authored by two women read in part: “The candidate of the Patriotic Pole received his colleague the way she deserves to be treated: with flowers. She moved the bouquet out of the way and he took a rose and offered it to her” (El Universal, 11/27/98). One picture in the *Nation and Politics* section of the paper showed Sáez with a baby; the accompanying caption read: “Irene will have her baby after the elections” (El Universal, 7/29/98). Even in items located in the *Nation and Politics* section of the newspaper Sáez was referred to as an ex-Miss Universe, a former beauty queen, or simply as a blonde. El Universal devoted one full page of a special election section of the newspaper to a discussion of the candidates’ dress! News articles made reference to Sáez’s tardiness, noting if a meeting was started late because the candidate failed to arrive on time. Articles in all sections of the newspaper referred to the candidate not by her last name, but rather by her first name. When polls were released, the accompanying charts would list all candidates by last name, with the exception of Sáez who almost always was listed simply as Irene.¹⁶

Newspaper articles reported the sexism that Sáez endured from the other political candidates. Hugo Chávez, angered by Sáez’s comment that those who had violated the constitution did not deserve the presidency, sent this message to Sáez: “Mayor, my message to you is this: how ill-fitting are the words of Carlos Andres Perez on your lips, and to your beautiful face...” (El Universal, 4/21/98). As Diego Bautista Urbaneja wrote, “They thought that a person who was so pleasing to the eyes could not be the center or base of anything” (El Universal, 6/11/98). Sáez was certainly aware of the differential treatment that she was receiving from other candidates and from the press. In an opinion article, Americo Martin writes, “Irene, perhaps because she is a woman, *as she says*, they will not forgive for trading in her loose Barbie locks for Eva Peron’s aggressive hairstyle... (El Universal; emphasis mine).

More Than Her Fair Share: A Quantitative Analysis

To gauge the effect that the news media may have had on the presidential bid of Sáez, I analyzed the coverage that Sáez, Salas Römer, and Chávez received from the daily newspaper El Universal. Although the 1998 elections featured a dozen presidential candidates, these three were strategically chosen because they ultimately took the largest percentages of the vote and

¹⁵ Campaign managers Anibal Romero and Rafael de la Cruz both mentioned (without my prompting) Luisana Colomine and Marta Colomina’s coverage of Sáez. Both Romero and de la Cruz believed that Colomine and Colomina’s columns damaged Sáez’s candidacy (Personal Interviews, 7/23/99 and 7/28/99).

¹⁶ Claudio Fermin, who finished fifth in the December elections, was sometimes referred to by his first name, but certainly less frequently than Sáez. Fermin, because of his dark skin, was sometimes simply referred to as *El Negro*.

were from the beginning of the election cycle the most viable candidates according to opinion polls and the press. El Universal was analyzed because of its large circulation (it and El Nacional are the most widely read newspapers in the country) and its availability.¹⁷ Further, El Universal is well-respected, was generally considered balanced and fair, and did not support any particular candidate. As a national newspaper, El Universal would likely impact a large number of voters in Venezuela.

Although the campaign did not officially begin until August 8, all issues of El Universal from January 1, 1998 to December 6, 1998 were carefully read, and all articles pertaining or simply mentioning Sáez, Salas Römer, or Chávez were more thoroughly analyzed. Coverage for these three candidates was placed into one of four categories: issue, event, horserace, or name. Issue coverage discussed a candidate's position on a particular issue or which discussed a candidate in relation to an issue which was part of the campaign; for example, articles that mentioned Chávez's stand on the nation's debt repayment were coded for issue coverage. When news of a candidate's campaign was printed, it was considered event coverage. Event coverage would include mentions of Salas Römer making a campaign stop in his home state of Carabobo. Horserace coverage mentioned how the candidates were doing in the polls; a paragraph that stated that Chávez led in the polls by 10 percent would be considered horserace coverage. Paragraphs or articles that were coded for name coverage simply made mention of a candidate without further analysis. A paragraph might then state that the governor of Carabobo Henrique Salas Feo was the son of presidential candidate and former governor of Carabobo Henrique Salas Römer or Irene's favorite meal. Candidate coverage was measured in paragraphs, and when one paragraph mentioned more than one category of coverage, the paragraph was placed into the higher category.¹⁸

Because women candidates may be seen as less newsworthy or their candidacies taken less seriously by the press, the placement of articles was noted. El Universal placed articles into the *News of the Day*, *Nation and Politics*, *Opinion*, *Economic*, *Sports*, *Society*, and *Caracas* sections. Letters to the editor were not analyzed.

The results of this analysis do not seem to suggest that Sáez received less media attention than her male counterparts.¹⁹ In January 1998, Sáez received a total of 139 paragraphs of coverage in El Universal, more than twice the amount of paragraphs devoted to the candidacy of Salas Römer and a total of 49.3 percent of all the coverage given to these three candidates. As late as May, Sáez continued to outpace her competitors in amount of news coverage. In February, Sáez received 228 paragraphs of coverage, while Chávez received 172 paragraphs and Salas Römer garnered 81 paragraphs. During March, Chávez and Sáez received almost equal amounts of coverage from El Universal, 38.9 percent versus 39.9 percent of all articles written, respectively. Sáez received 256 paragraphs of coverage in April, while Chávez was covered in 230 paragraphs and Salas Römer in 75 paragraphs. In May, 47.3 percent of the paragraphs

¹⁷ Kahn, in The Distorted Mirror, argues that the largest newspapers may also be the most professional, and therefore less likely than smaller newspapers to treat male and female candidates differently in their coverage of campaigns (Kahn, 158). Although I was unable to analyze a smaller newspaper's news coverage, it would certainly be interesting to see whether this hypothesis holds in this case.

¹⁸ The four different types of coverage mentioned here were placed on a scale of importance, with issue coverage being most important, then event coverage, horserace coverage, and finally name coverage.

¹⁹ In keeping with the historical pattern, de la Cruz insisted that Sáez received more media coverage than both Chávez and Salas Römer during the first months of 1998 because of her gender. She certainly received more media attention "than one would expect" (Personal Interview, 7/23/99). Please note that this analysis reflects only totals from the *Nation and Politics* section of El Universal.

written on these three candidates concerned Sáez, while Chávez was only covered in 37.9 percent of these paragraphs and Salas Römer in 14.8 percent.

By June, however, Sáez dipped suddenly in the amount of coverage she was receiving from El Universal. While Chávez received 559 paragraphs of coverage, Sáez received only 240 paragraphs and Salas Römer was given 174 paragraphs of coverage. In July, Sáez and Chávez received virtually identical amounts of coverage; she received 342 paragraphs of coverage and he received 325 paragraphs of coverage. As late as August, Sáez and Chávez differed little in the amount of coverage they were receiving from El Universal. Chávez received 400 paragraphs of coverage that month, compared to Sáez's 386. In September, Chávez received 48.8 percent of all campaign coverage, and Sáez was able to obtain only 28.8 percent of all coverage. In October, Chávez received 408 paragraphs of coverage (44.6 percent), while Sáez received only 231 paragraphs (25.3). In November, Sáez received only 18.5 percent of all campaign coverage, as compared to Chávez's 41.1 percent and Salas Römer's 40.4 percent.²⁰

An analysis of the issue coverage devoted to these three candidates, however, revealed that Sáez received less issue coverage than her male competitors. While on average, 37.6 percent of the paragraphs devoted to Chávez focused on issue coverage, only 33.3 percent of Sáez's coverage was issue coverage. Slightly over 35 percent of the coverage that Salas Römer received was issue coverage. Lack of issue coverage was indicative of the media's inability to take Sáez's candidacy seriously; by not allowing her positions to be heard, the media could effectively lead voters to believe that Sáez had no issue positions.²¹ A lack of issue coverage and increased emphasis on horserace coverage for women candidates "encourages voters to discount issues and emphasize viability when evaluating female candidates. Issues, on the other hand, probably play a more central role in evaluations of male candidates since issues receive more play and horse race less play in the news coverage of their candidacies" (Kahn and Goldenberg, 110). Issue coverage is especially important because it is one of the criteria that voters use in evaluating candidates.²²

Sáez also received less horserace coverage than her male counterparts. While 12.9 percent of Chávez's total coverage for the 11 month time period was devoted to the horserace as was 15.5 percent of Salas Römer's, Sáez percentage of horserace coverage was 11 percent. Though Kahn explains that voters who are exposed to more horserace coverage "may weigh viability concerns more heavily when developing overall evaluations of these candidates," she adds that "the actual content of the horserace information is also consequential" (Kahn, 162-163). Although Sáez received positive and abundant horserace coverage at the beginning of the campaign, by the end of the campaign articles that covered the horserace were increasingly negative. Less horserace information about Sáez made her candidacy less viable.

An analysis of coverage in the *News of the Day* section of El Universal revealed similar results.²³ Though Sáez received an average of nearly 21 paragraphs a month of coverage, Chávez obtained nearly 29 paragraphs monthly, but Salas Römer garnered less than 16 per month. A disaggregation of these totals, however, reveals that Sáez (18 paragraphs total) received less issue coverage than Chávez (65 paragraphs) and Salas Römer (21 paragraphs).

²⁰ For more detailed information, please see the graphs labeled January through November in the appendix.

²¹ Though initially Sáez was criticized by many for expressing vague and "sugary" positions on major issues, she and her team of advisors were able to recognize this as a problem and soon formulated a more solid platform.

²² I have not yet found information about the importance of issue coverage or policy positions in evaluating candidates in Latin America.

²³ News of the Day coverage in El Universal would be the equivalent of front page coverage in most newspapers.

Sáez obtained considerably less horserace coverage than her male counterparts—14 paragraphs of coverage to Chávez’s 33 and Salas Römer’s 32.

An analysis of the coverage devoted to these three candidates in the *Opinion* section of El Universal revealed that Chávez was overwhelmingly featured in opinion pieces. Nearly 70 percent of all paragraphs (1666 paragraphs out of a total of 2394 paragraphs) written about one of the three candidates was on Chávez. Only 11.4 percent of these paragraphs were on Salas Römer, and 19 percent were devoted to Sáez. Chávez also received a greater proportion of issue coverage than his competitors—954 paragraphs of issue coverage for Chávez versus 75 for Salas Römer and 131 for Sáez. Though more total paragraphs of horserace coverage were devoted to Chávez (59 paragraphs), he obtained the smallest percentage of horserace coverage relative to his overall coverage. Only 3.5 percent of paragraphs mentioning Chávez were devoted to coverage of the horserace. Salas Römer received the least amount (26 paragraphs), but greatest percentage (9.5) of horserace coverage.

The analysis of the *Economic* section of the newspaper showed that Sáez continued to receive less issue coverage than Chávez and less horserace coverage than both of her competitors; while Chávez received 98 paragraphs of issue coverage, Sáez received only 53 and Salas Römer a mere 13. Considering the “Chávez effect” that panicked the financial community, it was not surprising to find that Chávez received much more coverage in the *Economic* section of El Universal. Only one paragraph of horserace coverage was devoted to Sáez during the 11 month period, while six were devoted to Chávez and three to Salas Römer.

However, Sáez did receive more coverage than her male competitors in the *Society* section of El Universal. During the 11 month time period, Sáez was pictured in the *Society* pages seven times. Salas Römer’s photograph graced the *Society* pages only twice, while Chávez was never featured in the *Society* section. Not surprising considering her occupation as mayor of Chacao, Sáez was the only candidate among the three to receive any coverage in the *Caracas* section of El Universal; more surprising was the fact that Sáez was also the only candidate to be mentioned in the *Sports* section.

Alternative Explanations

There are, however, alternative explanations that could be proposed to explain the results of the quantitative analysis offered above. First, one could argue that the mass media in Latin America are oftentimes explicitly partisan, and that because only coverage in El Universal was analyzed, the results presented here are not representative of the media as a whole. However, Venezuela is an exceptional case within Latin America. As Robert Buckman writes, “The press in Venezuela takes pride in its ostensible neutrality; traditionally, newspapers do not even endorse candidates” (Buckman: Cole, 9). This was the case with El Universal, which did not endorse any particular candidate during the course of the campaign.

Another explanation would propose that the media were accurate in their portrayal of the campaign events. This view would argue that Chávez and Salas Römer did not emphasize their looks in their own campaigns and that they more fully elaborated clear stands on issues. Articles about them did not mention their physical appearance only because these candidates did not make that salient. They received more issue coverage, then, because they prioritized issues in their campaigns. This certainly did not appear to be the case; in none of the articles analyzed over the 11 month period from January through November 1998 did Sáez make reference to her past as a beauty queen or attempt to call attention to her looks. All three of the candidates proposed straightforward platforms and emphasized the issues of the day; the radicalized

positions that Chávez was proposing, however, may have made his issue positions easier for voters to identify and recollect.

A third explanation is that the media is following the polls rather than helping to shape them. Sáez, then, received less media coverage towards the latter half of her campaign not because the media were in any way sabotaging her campaign, but rather because her candidacy had already sunk. The media ignored her once she was no longer a viable candidate. This explanation is difficult to disprove when one looks solely at the amount of coverage that Sáez received; however, an analysis of the type of coverage that the three major competitors were receiving throughout the campaign indicates that the media was influencing the course of the campaign through their gendered critiques of Sáez.

Quantity and Quality: Conclusions

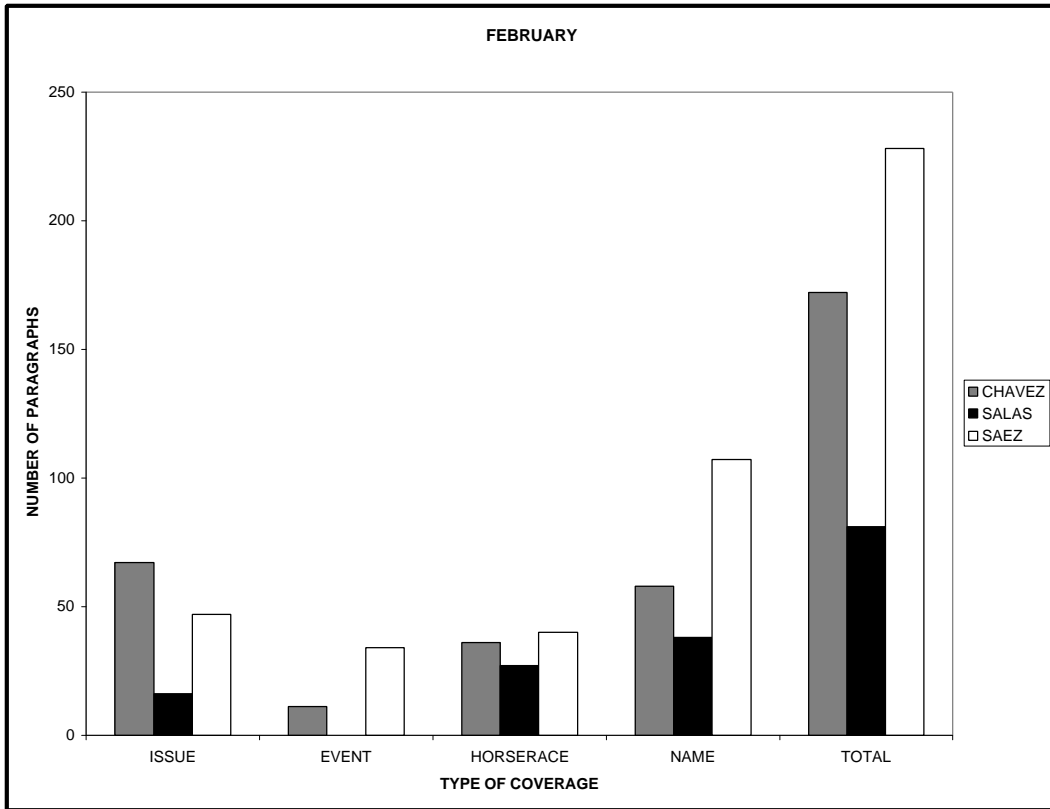
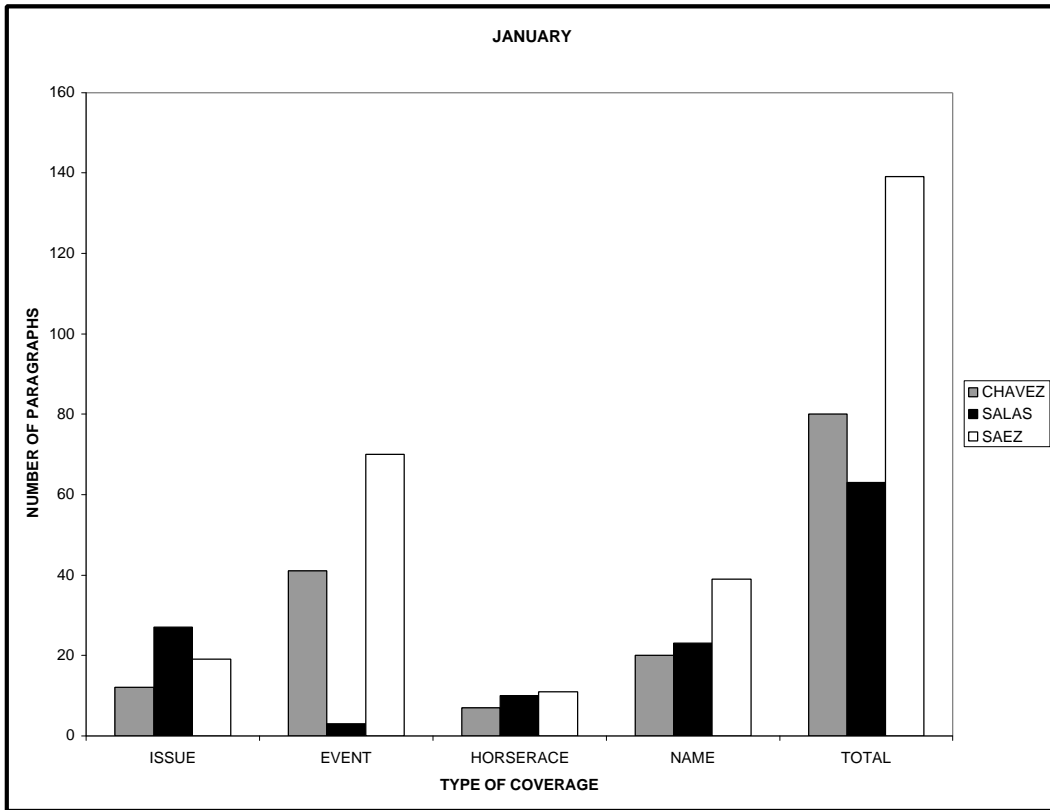
The results of this analysis appear to suggest that though Irene Sáez may have attained as much media coverage as her male competitors, Chávez and Salas Römer, the type of coverage that she received differed from theirs. In terms of overall coverage, the amount of media attention that Sáez received appears to be relatively positive—high at the beginning of the campaign because of the “newsworthiness” of a female candidate, and lower after August when Sáez slips drastically in the polls. A review of the figures for issue coverage (which show that Sáez received a smaller percentage of issue coverage than either Salas Römer or Chávez) indicate that the media may have contributed to a discrediting of Sáez’s presidential campaign. The lack of issue attention that Sáez received from El Universal may have impaired her ability to communicate attractive ideas, and so have damaged public perception about Sáez’s issue stance. While an abundance of horserace coverage has historically disadvantaged female candidates—at least in the United States—the unequal amounts of horserace coverage that Sáez received may have further harmed her candidacy. Her exceptional start in the polls was atypical. The amount of horserace coverage devoted to Sáez, however, was unexceptional considering her position in the polls during the early months of 1998.²⁴ Analyses of other sections of the newspaper introduce slightly different results, as previously discussed.²⁵

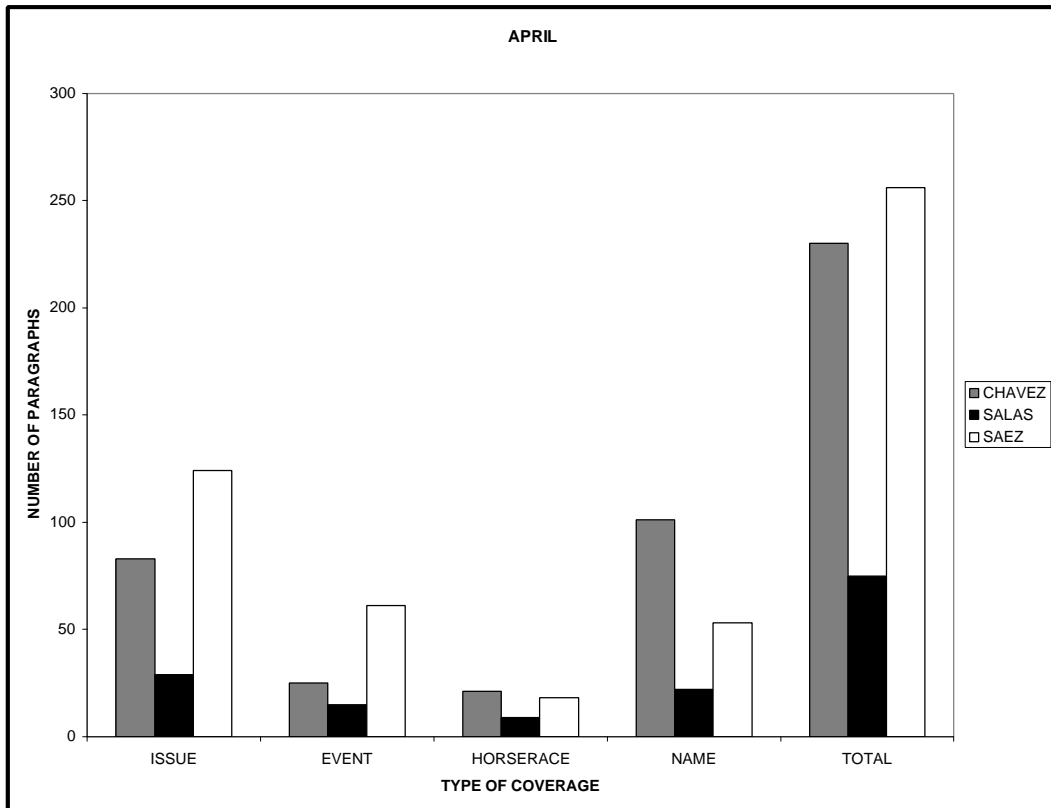
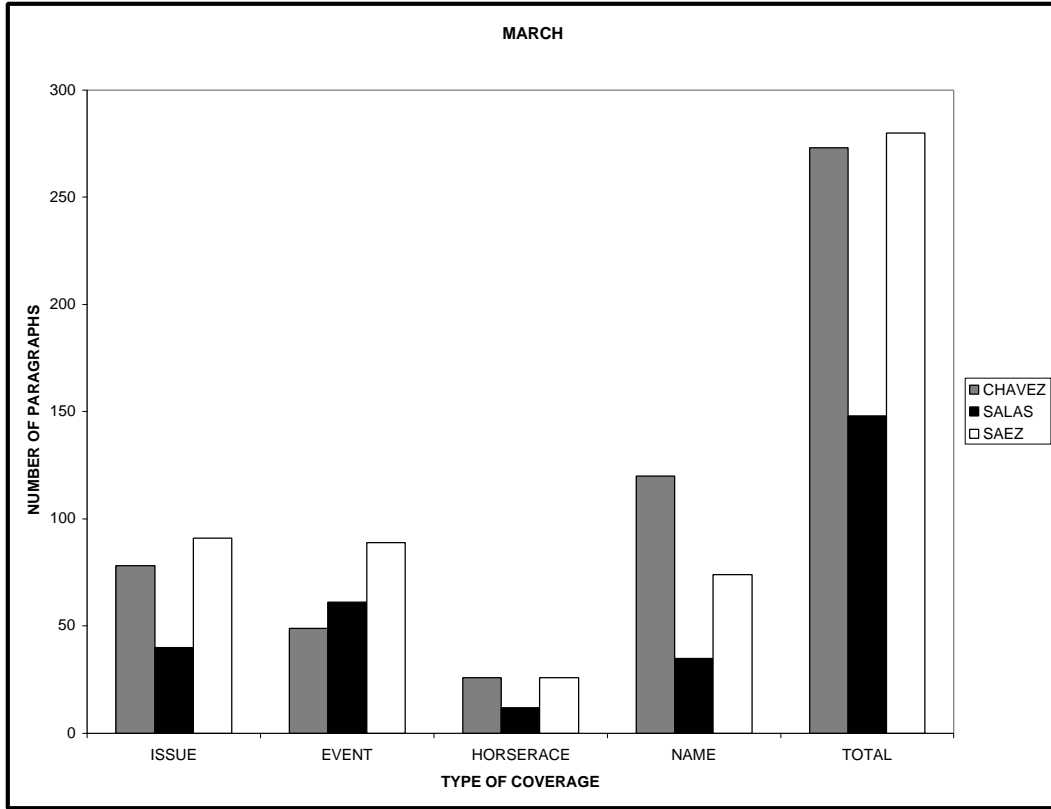
Although the results of this project indicate that Sáez was not forgotten by the media, they also suggest that the quality of news coverage that a candidate receives may be as important as the quantity of it. While blame for the failure of Irene Sáez’s presidential bid cannot be placed on the media, this project reveals that the media certainly reinforced gender stereotypes in its coverage of Sáez’s campaign, may have prevented voters from taking her candidacy seriously, and perhaps undermined her efforts to win the presidency.²⁶

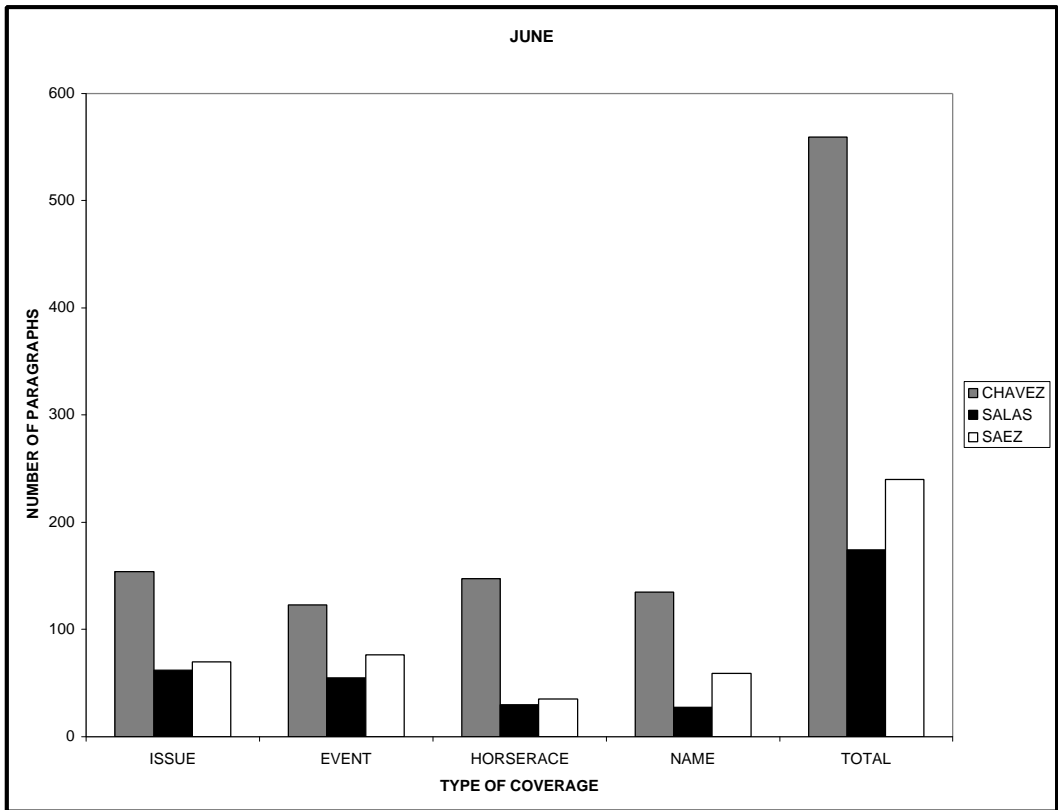
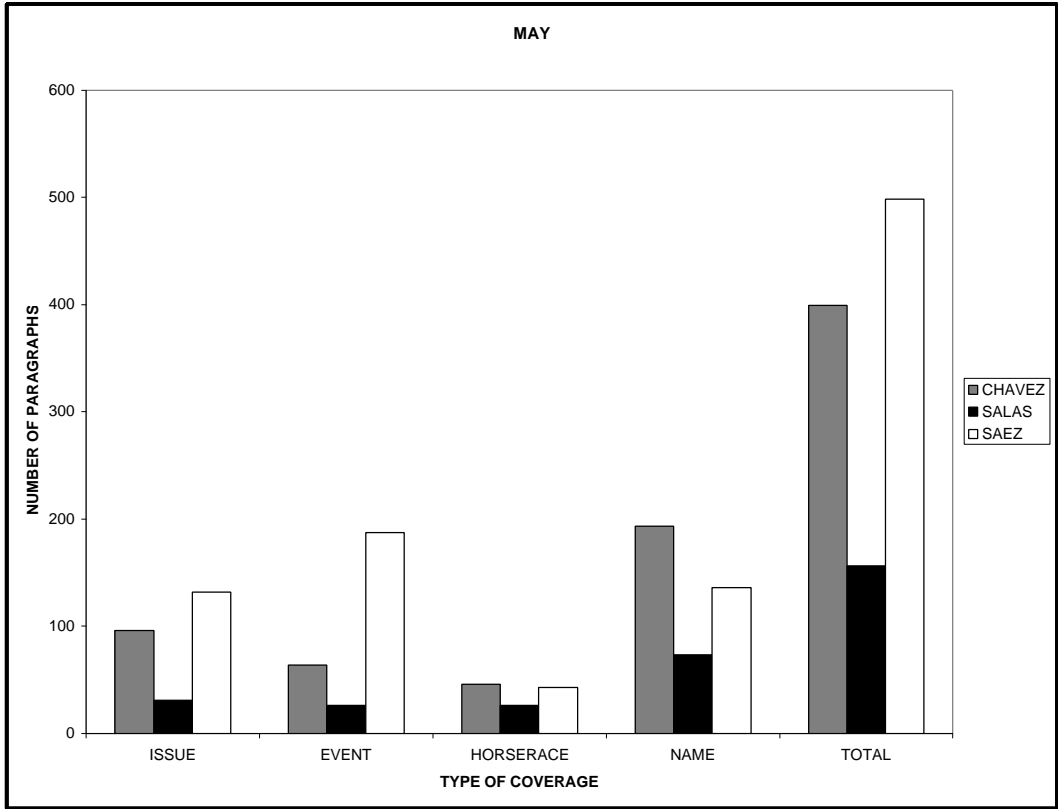
²⁴ Please refer to Graph 2.

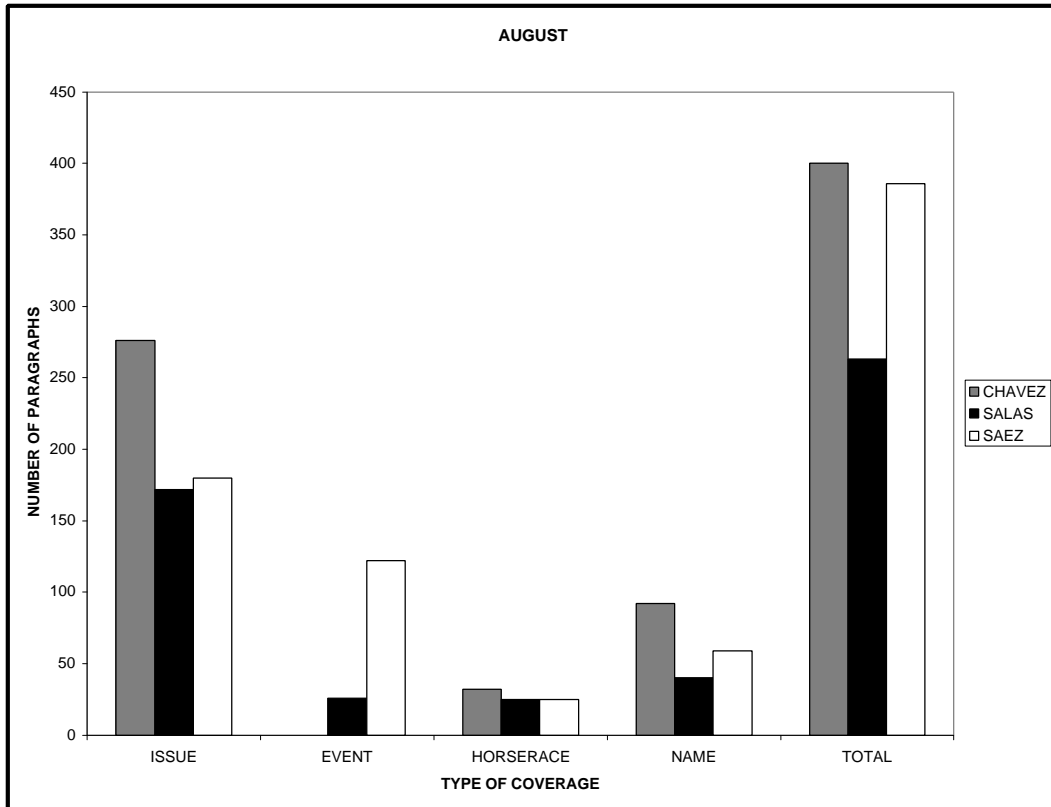
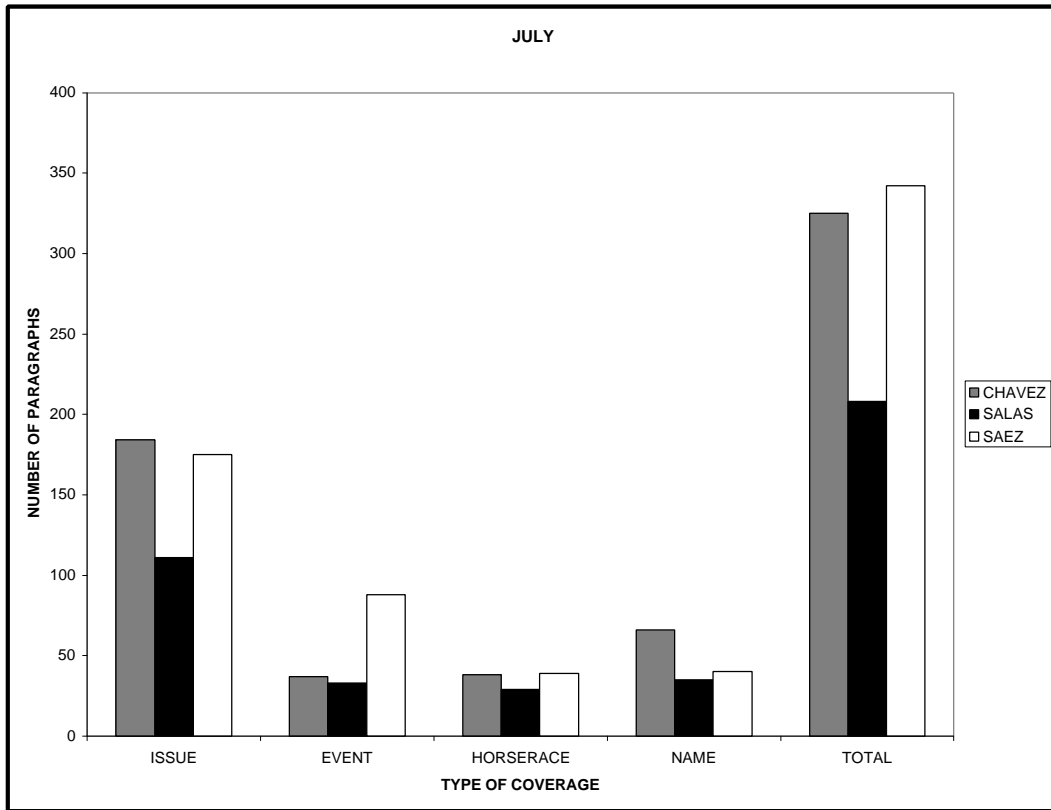
²⁵ It is important to recognize that the elections of 1998 were in many ways atypical for Venezuela. The novelty (and threat) of a coup leader running for office became evident in the analysis of the *Opinion* section of the newspaper.

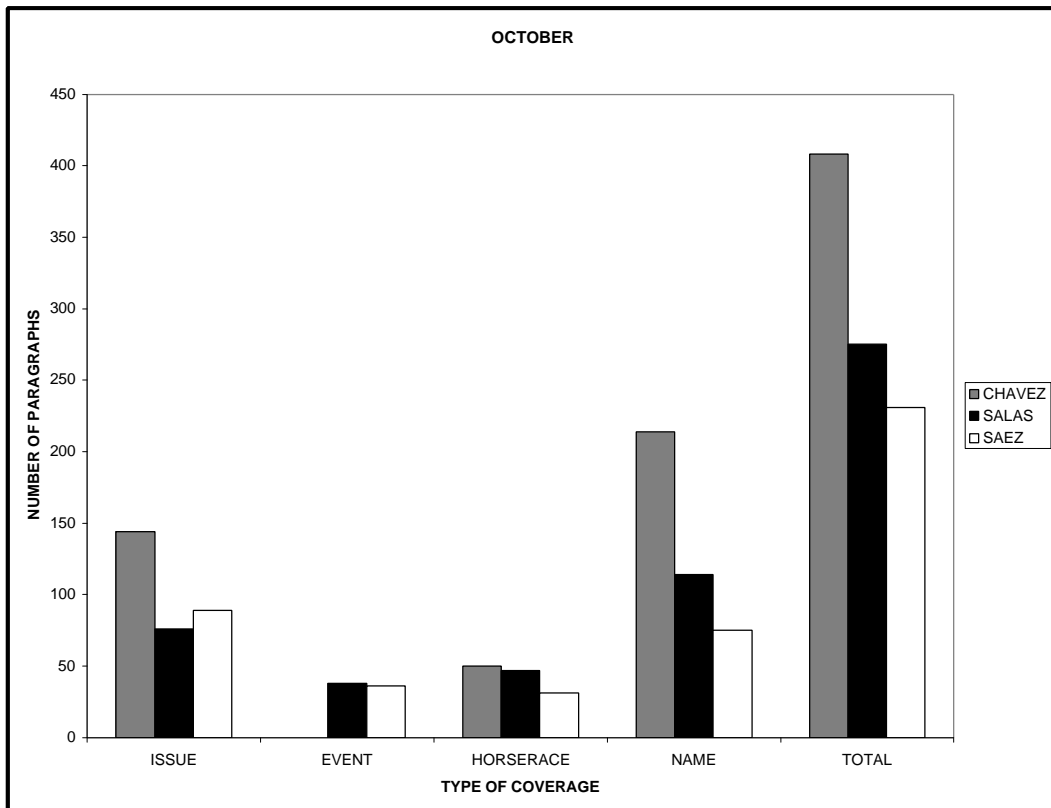
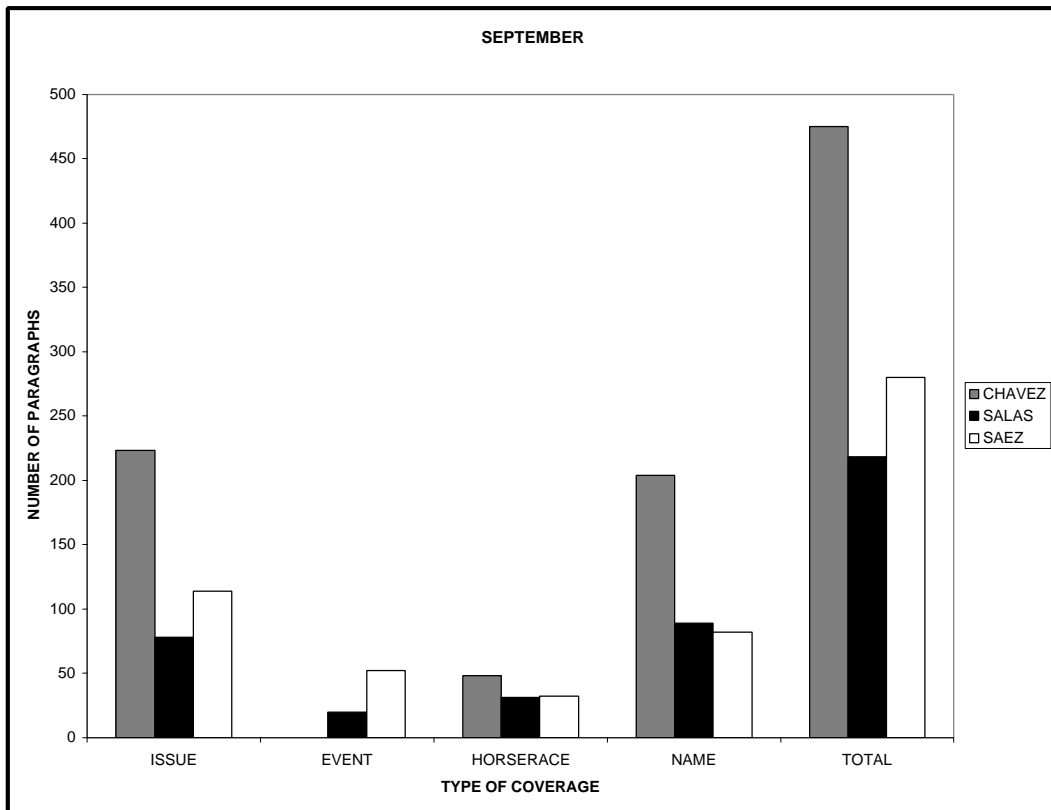
²⁶ My conclusions are rather understated, as you might note, because of the unusual circumstances of this case. This was an extraordinary election with extraordinary candidates in an extraordinary period in Venezuelan history. I expect that further research in this field will allow me to present more substantial conclusions.

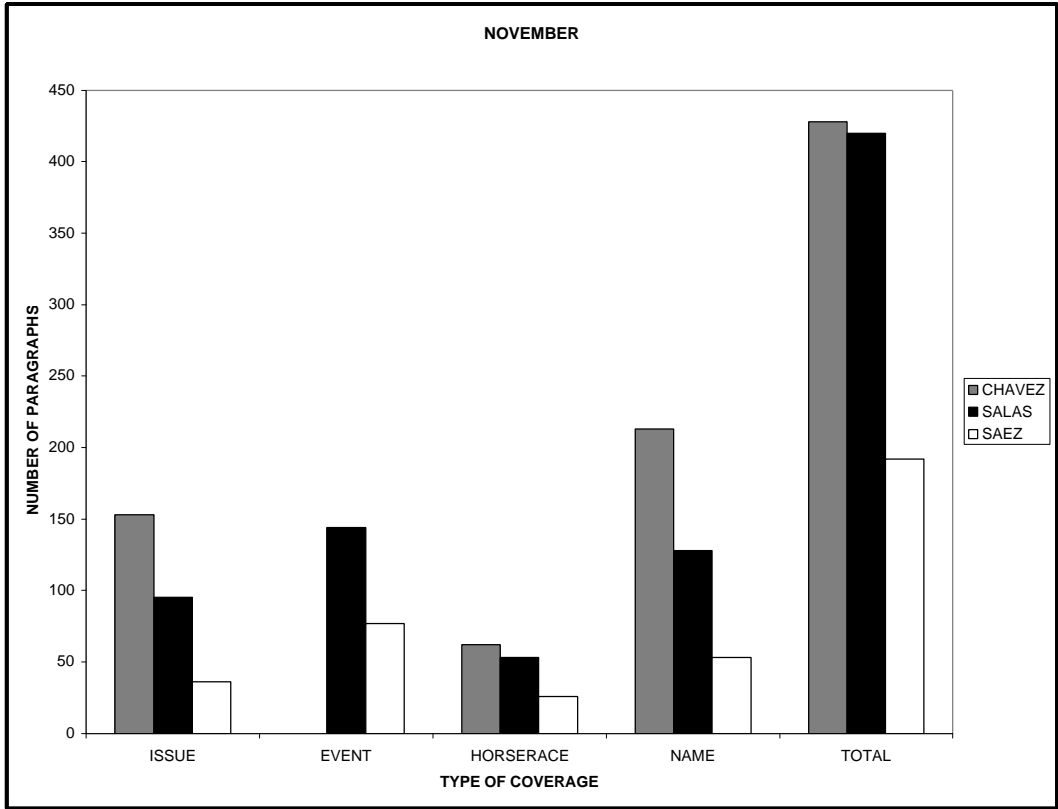


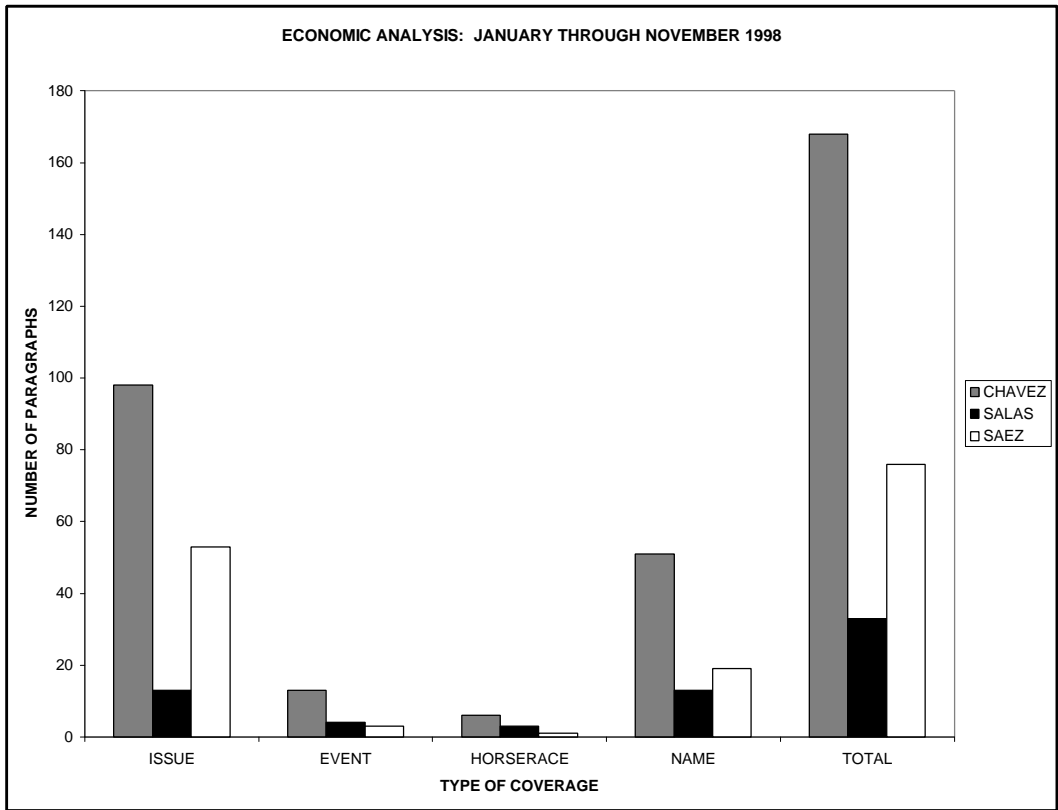
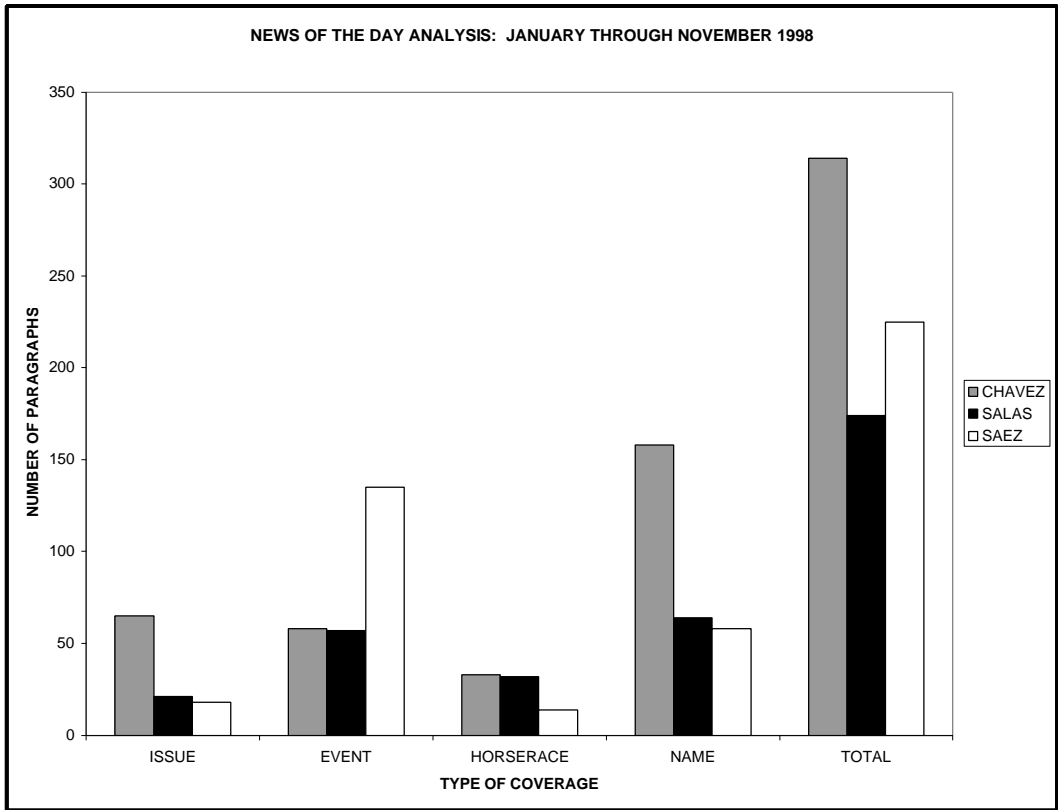


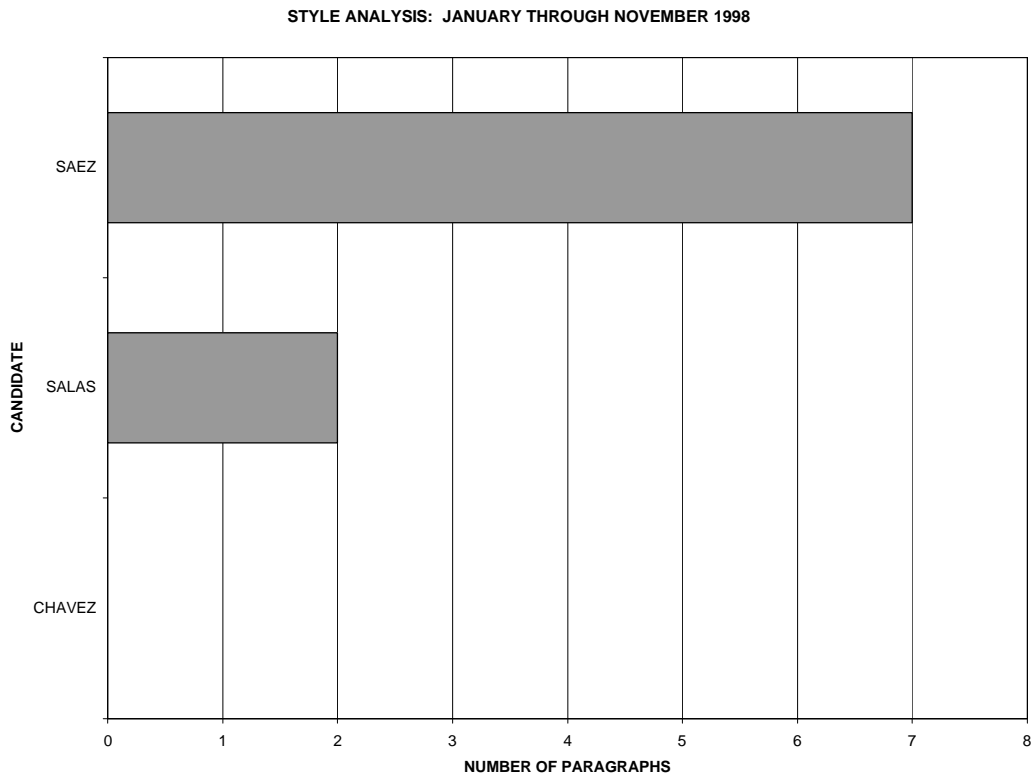
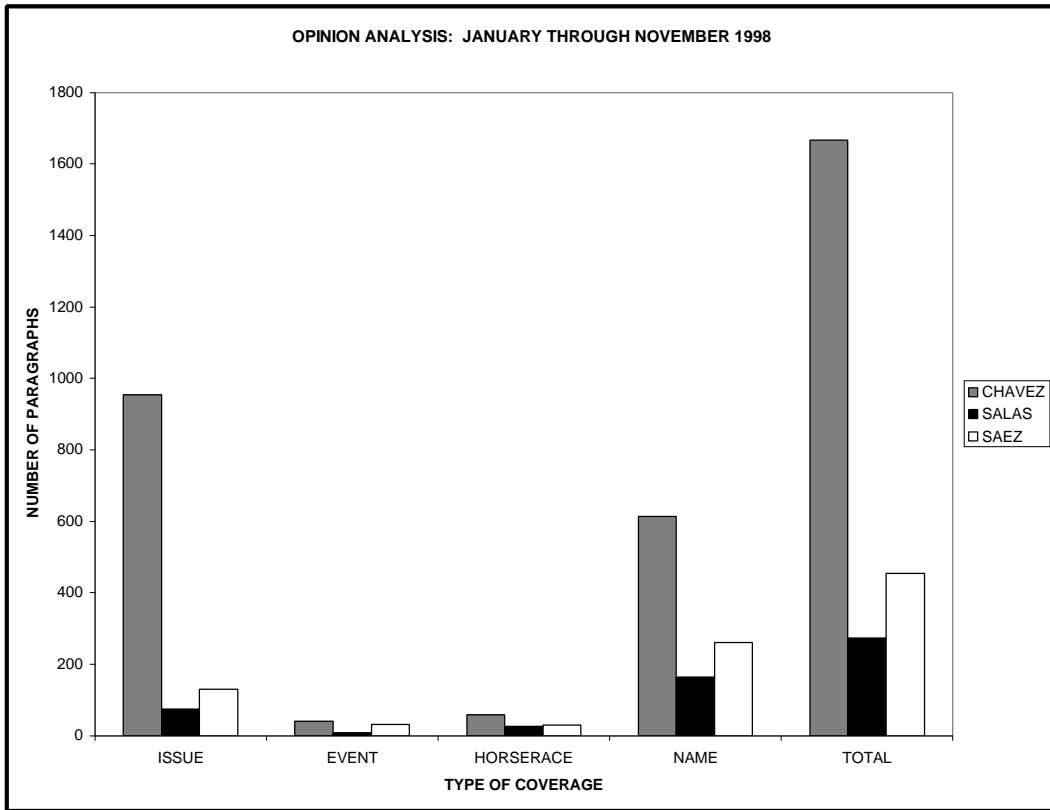












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