

## Comparison between press coverage of presidential campaigns and the agenda of journalists hosting debates<sup>1</sup>

*Comparación entre la cobertura de la prensa a campañas presidenciales y la agenda de los periodistas que conducen debates*

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Campaign coverage would prefer strategic game and personalization topics more than public policy proposals. Instead, electoral debates on television are expected to differentiate from the journalistic routine. Through a content analysis, the journalists' agenda in four Chilean presidential debates is compared with that of the written press in the coverage of the respective campaigns. The results show that journalists in the debates focus on public policies while the press concentrates on strategies or political issues.

**KEYWORDS:** Electoral debates, journalists' agenda, personalization, strategic coverage, presidential campaigns.

*La cobertura de campañas tendería a preferir temas de juego estratégico y personalización sobre propuestas de políticas públicas. En cambio, se espera que los debates electorales en televisión sean un momento diferenciador de la rutina periodística. Mediante un análisis de contenido, se compara la agenda de los periodistas en cuatro debates presidenciales chilenos con la de la prensa escrita en la cobertura de las respectivas campañas. Los resultados muestran que los periodistas en los debates se concentran en las políticas públicas, mientras que la prensa lo hace en las estrategias o en temas políticos.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Debates electorales, agenda periodística, personalización, cobertura estratégica, campañas presidenciales.

*A cobertura da campanha tenderia a preferir temas de jogos estratégicos e personalização sobre propostas de políticas públicas. Em vez disso, espera-se que os debates eleitorais na televisão sejam um momento diferenciador da rotina jornalística. Por meio de uma análise de conteúdo, a agenda dos jornalistas em quatro debates presidenciais chilenos é comparada com a da imprensa escrita na cobertura das respectivas campanhas. Os resultados mostram que os jornalistas em debates focam em políticas públicas, enquanto a imprensa foca em estratégias ou questões políticas.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Debates eleitorais, agenda jornalística, personalização, cobertura estratégica, campanhas presidenciais.

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## INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 elections in the United States revived a discussion about the role of the press in a democracy and approaching candidates during campaigns (Tabor & Wise, 2016), which became evident again during his re-election bid (Pilkington & Gabbatt, 2020). This discussion was transferred to the televised presidential debates and the role of the moderator, because of the first debate between Biden and Trump, due to the level of aggressiveness that it reached since the sitting president did not respect the rules of the encounter (Patten & Johnson, 2020).

The form that the coverage of the candidates takes in a particular campaign and how they are approached in a live television space have been permanent challenges in several countries. For example, Marien et al. (2020) show that far-right populist speeches have decreased the deliberative quality of televised debates in Europe, while Montez and Brubaker (2019) report an increase in aggressiveness in the discourse of US candidates between 2015 and 2016.

The literature identifies political coverage trends that threaten its quality with harmful consequences for democracy (de Vreese et al., 2017). One of them would be covered as a strategic game, which increases the public's cynicism, contributes to the decline of knowledge about politics, generates a negative evaluation and mistrust (Zoizner, 2021). The journalistic coverage after the debates tends to contain this logic of games, which has repercussions in a lesser understanding from the citizens about the topics discussed (Pingree et al., 2012).

Added to this is the focus on the personal characteristics of the candidates (personalization), which also influences the televised debate (Zamora Medina & Rebolledo, 2019), and the more significant space given to soft news, which would leave the public with little substantial information during the campaign (Reinemann et al., 2012). Although there is no conclusive evidence that these trends are growing in all Western democracies, it is clear that their presence becomes more constant, noticeable, and visible in the proximity of electoral processes (de Vreese et al., 2017).

### *Characteristics of electoral debates and their agendas*

Televised electoral debates have become a ritual within the campaigns, with the logic of a media event or television ceremony (Marín Lladó & Pérez Tornero, 2020). They act as interruptions to the news routine, which show the candidates gathered capable of maintaining a dialogue on the issues that will affect the country (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020). These instances are considered to have a civic and solemn character (Coleman & Moss, 2016) of mediated deliberation (Echeverría, 2019). They provide legitimacy to the democratic system (Coleman, 2000; Olson, 2013) and increase public trust in electoral politics (Lucaites, 1989). Even those who hold a critical view of this normative role recognize a quality of ritual deliberation in the event (Tanasoca & Sass, 2019).

However, as it is a normative expectation, it requires contextual components to fulfill a legitimizing function effectively. Above all, that the candidates decide to abide by the rules imposed by the debate and that the journalists or moderators in charge of guiding the interactions can guarantee fair treatment of the participants (Ben-Porath, 2007).

In addition, moderators must ensure that the topics discussed are of public interest since a fundamental element of any debate is the transaction of information (Schroeder, 2000). All the literature reaffirms positive increases in general knowledge regarding public policy issues, including decreasing levels of political cynicism and increasing interest in following the campaign and participating (Jennings et al., 2020; McKinney & Warner, 2013).

The debates are presented as hybrid arenas, where the political and media systems interact under self-imposed rules. Traditional political and journalistic routines are limited by norms that respond to the specific event of the presidential debate (Echeverría, 2017).

Richardson et al. (2008) highlight that the bibliography agrees on the journalist's power in setting the agenda and the framework of the topics to be discussed in the debates. Stromer-Galley and Bryant (2011) conclude that journalists are better prepared than the public –in the Town Hall formats in the United States– to formulate questions that elicit substantial answers while maintaining control over the agenda. Nguyen et al. (2014) conclude that the ability of journalists to set the

agenda of topics is undisputed, “since in a debate the moderators are the ones asking questions and literally controlling the topical focus” (p. 399).

The background provided by the works of Turcotte (2015, 2017) shows that, at least in the United States, the agendas of journalists in debates are focused on questioning public policies, distancing a lot from the coverage agenda in which the strategic approach and campaign issues prevail. Bastien (2020) studied the coherence between the journalistic coverage received by televised debates in Canada and the candidates’ agenda during the debates and concluded that the strategic framework has increased in both instances.

The studies above have neglected to compare the journalists’ agenda in the debates with the media’s agenda during the campaign, in synchronous studies, and with the same codebook and classification categories, which would allow verifying whether the debates can indeed provide an agenda of public service or broaden the variety of the topics, compared to the media coverage of the campaign. For this reason, we propose to compare the agenda developed by the journalists in the debates with the agenda that the press highlighted in the coverage of the respective electoral campaign, taking as a case study Chile’s traditional press and four of its presidential elections in a span of 30 years.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Serious press and coverage of political campaigns*

As we have already seen, the growing interest in campaign strategies and the strategic framework with its focus on the “horse race” in polls, at the cost of giving less coverage to substantial issues such as public policy proposals (Muñiz, 2014), would be the trends that dominate the coverage of politics, as well as personalization and the increase in negativism (Zeh & Hopmann, 2013). This situation is emphasized by the rise in commercial competition among the media, subject to an endless hunt for readers and clicks to survive (Gerth et al., 2009). According to what we have discussed initially, electoral debates are not expected to imitate these forms of coverage. However, some signs show

that these trends would also affect them (Echeverría, 2019; Rowland, 2013).

In addition, it has been exposed that the traditional press is forced to follow this agenda due to the commercial competition imposed by popular media and television (Magin, 2019; Patterson, 1994; Reinemann et al., 2012). Echeverría and González (2018) argue that there are internal pressures for this, for example, the media belonging to large conglomerates, oriented by marketing and profit. Added to this, there are external pressures, such as the overabundance of media that depend economically on the attention given to them by the public, such as Internet sites, cable TV, and free newspapers. This leads to the need to resort to stereotyped information that audiences can easily consume while focusing on sensationalist topics.

Takens et al. (2013) conclude that, when facing a campaign, all media would respond to the same logic. However, the content has evident differences depending on the type of media: printed or television. The authors attribute to the narrative forms of each media that the press concentrates more on the race between candidates and negative coverage. At the same time, TV tends to cover more public figures.

Schuck et al. (2013) do not find differences between the printed press and TV using the strategic framework or coverage focused on the conflict. But they do find evidence that the most serious newspapers focus more on the conflict than the tabloids, and, along with public television, they are more thoughtful about the role they play in an election. However, it must be considered that both investigations are concentrated in Europe, where the role of public television is essential. Hence, their generalization to the United States or Latin America is not automatic.

From the point of view of the various theories on democracy and the role of the media, the traditional press –elite media– is expected to provide “substantial, complete and differentiated political information as a basis for decision-making for elites and citizens interested in politics” (Magin, 2019, p. 1706), so if traditional media imitates the popular media, their democratic function would be at risk (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014).

*Personalization and strategic coverage<sup>5</sup>*

The media's personalization can be understood as focusing on politicians as individuals instead of emphasizing their parties, institutions, or public policy issues and topics (Adam & Maier, 2010). As Van Aelst et al. (2012), these authors distinguish two dimensions of personalization. First, what could be called general personalization ("individualization" according to Van Aelst et al. (2012)); second, there would also be a transformation in the way politicians are evaluated: it would no longer be based on their skills, public role, and performance, but rather based on characteristics not associated with politics, in which the authors call "privatization", where the focus of coverage is the private life and personal interests of politicians as "ordinary people" (p. 204).

In addition, based on Rahat and Sheafer (2007), we proposed a third category (Léon-Porath et al., 2015): the visibility of the candidates' campaign activities, given that these authors specify that personalization means that the journalistic focus is not only on politicians but also on their activities (more details in the methodology section).

Regarding strategic coverage, Cappella and Jamieson (1996) summarize its characteristics in five points: winners and losers as the primary concern of journalistic analysis; the language of war, games, and competition; a story with actors/performers, critics/adversaries, and audience (voters); emphasis on the candidate's performance, style, and perceptions; and the great importance given to polls, the position and evaluation of the candidates and their campaigns. Patterson (1994) describes a similar situation under the concept of "game stories", which frame the campaigns within the context of the strategies and tactics followed by the candidates and their possible successes and failures in the polls, a concept broadened by the author's prior definition to "horse race journalism" (Patterson, 1977). De Vreese (2005) highlights the similarities between Jamieson's and Patterson's concepts.

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<sup>5</sup> We have discussed these points extensively in Porath et al. (2014) and Léon-Porath et al. (2015).

### *The case of the presidential debates in Chile*

Chile is one of the few Ibero-American countries that present continuity in holding presidential debates since its return to democracy in 1989. In addition –since 1993– the main debate has been broadcast simultaneously by all the open television channels, grouped in the National Television Association of Chile (ANATEL), which ensures a rating of over 40% of the audience (Hilsenrad, 2020).

In Chile, the debates are held under the “journalists’ panel” format, which was used in the United States until the end of the 1980s and is still used in that country in many primary election debates. This format guarantees a predominant role for these professionals since they are the ones who guide the discussion, introduce the topics and question the candidates (Eveland et al., 1994). A journalist for each ANATEL channel with a press department participates in this panel, so the final composition depends on an editorial and commercial decision of the channels, which transforms the hosts of the debates into the “face” or anchor of their respective television stations and puts additional pressure on them to have a prominent role. In this way, Chile becomes an “extreme case” from the methodological point of view of its selection, where the situation studied is much more likely to occur: for the purposes of this research, the journalist’s predominant role in determining the agenda of the debate.

Like most Latin American countries, Chile has a presidential system based on a multiparty one that favors a significant number of candidates. Since 2005, all officially registered candidates have participated in the debates (see Porath et al., 2019), which establishes a difference with the presidential debates of the United States. But unlike Europe, where debates with more than two candidates are more common, in Chile, presidential candidates participate but not parliamentary leaders.

In the development of our research, we have been able to verify that channels from other Latin American countries have asked ANATEL for advice on the organization of their presidential debates and that, in some way, this explains the dissemination of the journalists’ panel format in the region (Ruiz & Alberro, 2012), so we can state that the study of the case of Chile is established as a prototypical model for South America and its multiparty presidential system.

*The coverage of campaigns and politics in Chile*

All the records show that, in Chile, until the mid-2010s, the media followed world trends regarding political coverage (Porath et al., 2014). In large part, this is explained by the importance of television as a source of information for the public, and because it evolved from a public service model, rooted in university channels, to an eminently commercial one based on private companies seeking profits (Tironi & Sunkel, 2000), in which state television must be financed exclusively by advertising (Godoy, 2000). Due to these changes, television has either moved away from politics, focusing on issues such as sports and crime (Valenzuela & Arriagada, 2009), or has adopted a sensationalist and dramatic language approach (Mujica & Bachmann, 2013), placing the human factor at the center of their stories (Porath et al., 2009).

Given that the panel of journalists for the Chilean debates comprises TV professionals, it could be expected that their agenda would coincide with that of the channel, assuming its previously defined characteristics. In addition, it should be noted that Turcotte (2017) finds that it is precisely the debates with the panel of journalists in which fewer questions refer to substantial issues. Thus, the agenda of the debates in Chile could be expected to emphasize more topics such as personalization and strategies and focus less on public policy proposals than the agenda of the traditional media.

This occurs in a context marked by the media's high ideological and economic concentration (Anguita Ramírez & Labrador Blanes, 2019). This phenomenon would become visible in the written press. *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, the two traditional newspapers that we will analyze here, are among the few with a national scope and belong to the two largest journalistic companies in Chile, El Mercurio SAP, and Copesa SA, which together dominate between 70% and 80% of the newspaper market. Both have been characterized as diffusers of the economic-political thought of the Chilean right-wing (Navia & Osorio, 2015) while setting the political tone and being the platform for discussion of public affairs (Gronemeyer & Porath, 2017).

Considering this background, we assume that the analyzed press should be differentiated from television and popular newspapers regarding its agenda. Thus, if we verify that the agenda of the debates



differs from the agenda of the traditional press, in terms of less emphasis on strategies and personalization, we can assume that it also differs from the coverage of the Chilean campaign by other media types. This confirms that it is indeed an interruption of the traditional journalistic routine.

## METHODOLOGY

This study begins with the secondary use of a database on press coverage of three Chilean presidential campaigns (1989, 1999 and 2009) (León-Porath et al., 2015). This is a content analysis of the information covered by the respective electoral campaigns. To update this database, another two weeks were recorded from the newspapers selected for this study, for the 2017 campaign, which covered the entire official campaign. At the time of writing this work, that year was the most recent presidential campaign carried out in the country. For the present study, only the information generated by the media itself (e.g., analysis or evaluations made by journalists or that are not attributable to sources) was recorded, discarding the one coming directly from political actors (press conferences, statements to the media, or campaign events description). In total, 1 811 units were analyzed for the four elections. For each one of them, up to three topics could be determined.

In the case of the presidential debates organized by ANATEL, a new content analysis was carried out in which all the journalists' interventions during the debates of the first electoral round, for each analyzed presidential campaign, were recorded (for 1989 the only debate held, organized by Channel 13, was recorded). To classify them, this study is based on the same codebook of the original project, even the same set of codifiers. In total, 398 interventions by journalists were recorded. The code was organized around nine major topics, which were further subdivided into various subtopics. For our purposes, these codes were regrouped as shown in Table 1. We will understand by agenda the topics selection and the focus given to specific issues by the media.

A reliability test was performed for the "topics" variable as a multiple response group, recoded into seven categories, in a subsample of 530 cases from the entire general database, obtaining a Holsti

index of 0.867 and a Scott Pi of 0.813. All the following analyses are carried out by weighing the unit of analysis by its respective length (number of paragraphs in the case of newspapers and number of words in the case of journalists' interventions) to account for the issuer's emphasis in each section of their intervention.

## RESULTS

The topics used by the analyzed press to cover the 2017 presidential campaign (Table 2) break in three senses with what could have been a trend, according to our previous observations (León-Porath et al., 2015). First, after a clear downward trend, there is an increased focus on policies and programs (from 6.3% in 2009 to 15.2% in 2017).

Second, there is a slight decrease in the focus on strategies, from 31.4% in 2009 to 26.9% in 2017. In the analyzed media, we can see a reduction in the emphasis on the candidates' personal attributes or private life, which had increased from 2.6% in 1989 to 6.5% in 2009 but returned to 2.6% in 2017. If the three dimensions of personalization proposed are considered together (candidate activity, political attributes, and personal attributes), these fall below the range of 20% to 13.8% in 2017.

There is also an increase in the media's interest in political issues, among which are controversial issues during the campaign and matters of greater political relevance. These had remained in the range of 25% in the three previous campaigns and reached 36.4% in 2017. This is important because this topic clearly displaces interest in campaign strategies to second place for the first time. This situation confirms what was found in the literature on strategic coverage and personalization since it has not been possible to determine a sustained trend towards a uniform increase in these coverages throughout the world. Still, they always remain at a high level.

Regarding the agenda of topics addressed by the journalists in their questions in the presidential debates (Table 2), it can be detected that there is a change in the order of priorities over time. While between 1989 and 1999, the first place of interest was on political topics in general, in 2009, it was displaced to second place due to the increase in interest

TABLE 1  
 CATEGORIES FOR CLASSIFYING CAMPAIGN COVERAGE TOPICS

<p>Issues and political topics in general</p>	<p><b>General political discussion:</b> role of political institutions; legal reforms; electoral participation; internal life of political parties and coalitions; role of the media in politics.</p> <p><b>Controversial campaign topics:</b> transparency and conflicts of interest; dirty campaign; claims of government corruption or electoral interventionism.</p> <p><b>Political support:</b> what groups support which candidate.</p> <p><b>Ideologies, values and judgments:</b> assessment of historical processes; the role of the State; the historical role of the party; moral discussion; ideologies; meaning of democracy; human rights.</p>
<p>General information of the campaign</p>	<p>Campaign activities without the presence of the candidate; anecdotal facts; word games; meetings; information about the electoral process.</p>
<p>Public policies and government programs</p>	<p>Finance; business; labor market and unions; transport; energy; health; education; living place; poverty; foreign policy, police and justice, etc.</p>
<p>Campaign strategies</p>	<p><b>Horse race:</b> analysis and information on surveys.</p> <p><b>Debates:</b> rules and preparation of the debates and general evaluation.</p> <p><b>Strategies</b> and modalities for the development of campaigns; campaign team –staff– “war room”; financing; advertising evaluation.</p>

<p>Visibility of candidates' campaign activities</p>	<p>Presentation of the candidates in forums and debates in the media, and evaluations of their presentations.</p> <p>Information on the proselytizing activities carried out by the candidates, their appearance in political meetings.</p> <p>General discussion about the best candidate for a party/coalition, mechanism, and criteria to select them.</p>
<p>Individual competencies and performances (political attributes and skills of individual candidates)</p>	<p><b>Competencies:</b> aptitude, suitable for political office (and their denials).</p> <p><b>Integrity:</b> honest, fair person, performing their duties without fault (and their denials).</p> <p><b>Confidence:</b> firm hope in the person of the candidate; they can be trusted to do their job (and their denials) well.</p> <p><b>Charisma:</b> expressions that show that the candidate has a special ability to attract or fascinate (and their denials).</p> <p><b>Ideology:</b> Any description or assessment of the values, ideologies, and beliefs of the candidate.</p>
<p>Privatization (personal life of the candidates and non-political personal characteristics)</p>	<p>References to their family; appearance and clothing; biography; economic heritage; age and health; aspects of their personality (non-political, such as a sense of humor or friendliness); private life, hobbies, type of housing, place of rest; private professional activity (non-political).</p>

Source: The authors.

TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF THE AGENDAS OF THE DEBATES AND THE TRADITIONAL PRESS ACCORDING TO CAMPAIGN YEAR

	1989					1999				
	Debate		Press		Difference	Debate		Press		Difference
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
General political topics	46.2%	23	23.1%	39	23.2%	42.6%	8	24.5%	113	18.1%
General campaign information	0.0%	0	5.9%	10	-5.9%	0.0%	0	13.9%	64	-13.9%
Public policies and programs	38.1%	19	20.6%	35	17.6%	37.8%	7	10.7%	49	27.2%
Campaign strategies	5.0%	2	21.7%	37	-16.7%	19.6%	4	30.2%	139	-10.6%
<i>Dimensions of personalization</i>										
Activities of the candidates	0.0%	0	18.9%	32	-18.9%	0.0%	0	6.5%	30	-6.5%
Individual political attributes	10.6%	5	7.3%	13	3.3%	0.0%	0	8.5%	39	-8.5%
Personal attributes (privatization)	0.0%	0	2.6%	4	-2.6%	0.0%	0	5.8%	27	-5.8%
Absolut difference					88.1%					90.6%
TOTAL	100.0%	50	100.0%	171		100.0%	18	100.0%	460	
	$x^2 = 33.08; p < 0.000$					$x^2 = 20.09; p = 0.003$				
	2009					2017				
	Debate		Press		Difference	Debate		Press		Difference
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
General political topics	33.3%	36	27.7%	141	5.6%	23.4%	52	36.4%	243	-13.0%
General campaign information	2.2%	2	11.8%	60	-9.6%	0.0%	0	7.7%	52	-7.7%
Public policies and programs	36.1%	39	6.3%	32	29.8%	56.8%	126	15.2%	102	41.6%
Campaign strategies	15.8%	17	31.4%	160	-15.6%	5.7%	13	26.9%	180	-21.2%
<i>Dimensions of personalization</i>										
Activities of the candidates	2.9%	3	10.9%	55	-8.0%	1.6%	4	5.6%	38	-4.0%
Individual political attributes	7.6%	8	3.5%	18	4.1%	8.6%	19	5.6%	38	3.0%
Personal attributes (privatization)	2.2%	2	8.5%	44	-6.3%	3.9%	9	2.6%	17	1.3%
Absolut difference					79.0%					91.9%
TOTAL	100.0%	108	100.0%	511		100.0%	222	100.0%	669	
	$x^2 = 101.78; p < 0.000$					$x^2 = 180.48; p < 0.000$				

Source: The authors.

in public policies and program proposals. A substantial difference can be already established, with the agenda of the analyzed media more focused on campaign strategies. In the debates, there is also less interest in aspects of personalization: the sum of the three indicators in this regard remained above 20% in press coverage until 2009, while in the analyzed debates, it never reached that range.

When analyzing in detail the similarities and differences in the agendas of the coverage of the media with that of the journalists in the debates for the four campaigns for which we have the data (Table 2), we see that the differences, in terms of the percentages assigned to each topic considered, have been significant: they are around a total of 90 absolute points on three occasions and 79 points in 2009. The main difference is in the importance given in the debates to public policy proposals, more neglected in press coverage. The difference started in 1989 with 17.6 points, which increased successively until reaching 41.6 in 2017, despite the increase shown about this issue in the press that year, accumulating a total of 116 points away in the four campaigns.

The second element of contrast is marked by the greater interest of the press in campaign strategies, differences that accumulate a total of 64 absolute points in the four campaigns analyzed. The most significant distance was observed in 2017 (21.2%), although the press reduced its focus on that point. Thus, a situation is configured in which, even though, in principle, in 2017 the press tended to approach the priorities that journalists had shown in the debates of 2009 (increasing the space devoted to public policies and reducing the space dedicated to campaign strategies) the absolute distance increased again. This was due to the concentration of questions in the debate on the candidates' public policy plans, reaching 56.8% of the total debate topics, a concentration never seen before.

This situation can be explained by a reaction of the journalists participating in the presidential debate, in the face of the scandal produced in public opinion by the primary debate of the center-right coalition in that same campaign, which was marked by crossed recriminations and personal attacks. This would have led the debate's journalists to focus on topics that they considered most advantageous to the public.

The third aspect that accumulates differences is the treatment of political topics in general, an element on which the journalists in the debates placed great emphasis in 1989 (46.2%) and 1999 (42.6%), not so much the press (around 24%). However, in 2009 both agendas got close when the absolute difference reached only 5.6 points, but they distanced again in 2017 (13 points of difference). This time is due to the decreased focus on these issues during the debates (a situation already explained here) and the increased interest of the press in it.

It also deserves comment on what happened with the personalization. Suppose the three factors into which the variable above was divided for this study (activities, political attributes, and personal attributes of the candidates) are considered together. In that case, it can be seen that in 1989 its total was similar in both agendas (around 10%). In 1999 a particular situation occurred: since the rules forced journalists to ask only common questions, i.e., the same question had to be answered in turns by the two candidates present, it was impossible to ask questions regarding individual aspects of each candidate and/or candidacy. That year, the analyzed media also allocated 14.3% of their topics to the personalization of the campaign, surpassing public policies (10.7%). In 2009, the values were again similar (12% in the media against 9.8% in the debate), and in 2017 there was –for the first time– a slight increase regarding interest in the debates' topics (12.5%) while in the press fell to 8.2%.

However, if the internal composition among the three indicators is considered, there is a significant difference. For the journalists hosting the debates, the focus on personalization has always been on the political attributes of the candidates. This topic is expected to be of interest to the public since it precisely points to one of its objectives: to test the aptitudes of the presidential candidates for office. Instead, the press, for example, in 2009 focused on the so-called aspects of privatization. Although if the obvious interest of the press in covering the activities of the candidates is deducted, typical of their work of informing, in the other three years analyzed, the press also preferred to highlight the political attributes over the personal ones.

## FINAL DISCUSSION

Our study has proven that electoral debates are a particular moment in the coverage of electoral campaigns, at least in terms of the topics journalists propose to the candidates for discussion. In the analyzed case, the agenda that the journalists use to formulate their questions differs substantially from the agenda with which the traditional media, the so-called “serious press”, covers the campaign; devoting more space to the discussion of the “substantial issues” of an electoral campaign, such as public policy proposals, and less to the topics that prevail today in the world’s coverage of campaigns, such as strategic game and personalization.

To validate this test, we must remember that Chile was described here as an extreme case in terms of the leading role journalists have in developing the debate. Due to its adoption of the American experience with the format of the journalists’ panel and because the hosts are faces or anchors of their TV channels, it could be expected that the agendas would be similar to those of the press or that the debate would even be more marked by strategy and personalization issues. In our bibliographical discussion, we have established that the press agenda should not differ much from TV. Still, we have also shown that, in the case of Chile, the TV should be even more focused on these issues, given its heavy commercialization.

Suppose in these conditions we have shown that the agenda of the debates focus more on the substantial issues. In that case, we should expect that countries that do not use the panel of journalists and/or their hosts are not TV personalities; their agendas would also tend to focus more on substantial issues than the general media coverage of the electoral campaign. This is something that now must be empirically demonstrated. Therefore, we can affirm that the debate responds to its own media logic, which is effectively isolated from the daily journalistic routine, becoming an informative and deliberative space on the essential issues of the campaign, thus fulfilling its character as a civic ritual, probably because in Chile the journalists present at the televised debates have tended to develop a journalistic style of a civic nature (Núñez-Mussa, 2018) focused more on knowing what the plans



of the presidential candidates are, rather than about topics that could be considered controversial such as ideals, values, or personal qualities.

This is consistent with Schroeder's proposal (2000), which maintains that the debates, by not depending on the logic of the commercialization of the media, can generate a difference in the way of covering the candidates and their issues; thus, preserving its democratic character and maintaining the objective of being a communicative instance where potential voters, especially undecided ones, can learn about and contrast the proposals of the candidates in a limited space and time. In any case, it is necessary to keep a permanent discussion about the formats and regulations since the tradition and existence of the event itself does not guarantee that it fulfills that function, as demonstrated by the debates of the US election in 2020.

As a final reflection, it is possible to say that, despite the growing imposition of commercial logic in the media, the presidential debates in Chile continue to be a space that favors questions that deal with public policies over issues related to character. Probably because these debates, being broadcast on all television channels, reduce competition between stations and ensure a high rating. This accounts for the value of the instance within the democratic process.

At the same time, our work complements a previous one on the media agenda in electoral campaigns (León-Porath et al., 2015). It confirms that, in the case of Chile, the pre-eminence of issues such as strategic coverage or personalization, despite having an important impact on the press agenda, is not constantly growing. It presents setbacks, which accounts for a moving nature. This reaffirms the need to analyze which variables explain these changes in the interest of journalistic coverage compared to political or substantial issues of the campaign, which requires closer observation of specific cases.

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