

The Role of the Media in Electoral Processes
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I have been invited to participate in this panel and would like to thank the sponsors of this meeting for the opportunity to reflect upon this issue. The media plays a key role in electoral processes as candidates and political parties depend on it for media access.

Democracy requires that the media be inclusive and supervise public policy in order to be considered as universal vehicles of information. The above always keeping in mind freedom of expression.

The following paragraphs will attempt to provide a vision from not only the point of view of the media, but also that of electoral management bodies (EMBs).

Media Legislation

Before analyzing the issue of media legislation, it is important to consider types of legislation that countries have in order to regulate the media and, which at the very least, should guarantee public access to information, while also rejecting censorship and protecting journalist sources.

In addition, legislation should guarantee media pluralism through norms that regulate media property and ensure their transparency.

It is not our role to analyze legislation, but it is important to have it present as a basis of discussion for this issue.

Governmental Media

It is important to develop various ideas on the role of governmental media. There are cases where governments have exclusive or some property rights and others with free access to certain types of media, both of which contain governmental responsibility.

What Kind of Role Should Governmental Media Play in Electoral Processes?

The main elements that integrate an election should be communicated by governmental media. This basically includes information on political parties and candidates participating in the process, questions of debate, the voting process, and any other elements which encourage a friendly process for voters.

Consequently, the media must be impartial and balanced in their election news coverage and should not present programs or articles that favor one particular candidate or political party.

Governmental Media should also educate voters on the general and particular issues of the electoral process.

Taking into account the above, one can say that the governmental media should fulfill similar functions as that of the EMB.

With regards to election coverage, we are currently delving into a very interesting issue, the difference between public and private media. It seems that governmental media has greater responsibility with respect to impartial information and objectivity, and is set apart from electoral intervention provided by other media resources.

Other Factors on the Media in General

It is important to note that with time the media has garnered a greater role in determining political agendas, setting issues of public interest, obligating political parties and candidates to follow these agendas, and in many cases, against their own interests.

From this point of view, the media has in practice developed to be a great power within any electoral process.

We are not criticizing partisan media, which is legitimate only when it does not distort or omit news. It would be unjustified to think that partisan media could be completely disconnected to the interest which guides it. That being said, this is not applicable to an editorial page which precisely reflects the institutional voice of the media.

In addition, media which greatly reflects one party or candidate is not necessarily a test of a determined preference. This may be a result of the candidate's numerous activities or their interesting personality, which is inherent to the informative process.

Apart from what has been said on the role of the media in electoral processes, it is clear that electoral management bodies (EMB) should maintain a constant and permanent relationship with the media in order to inform them on the background of the process. There should also be a space within each EMB to do so.

The media also has an important responsibility in reporting irregularities that could arise during an electoral process and, in turn, holds a supervisory role. This situation is viewed more frequently with respect to information that is extended to electoral processes by the EMB, such as EMB websites. This allows uploaded data to have an indefinite duration of time on the web, permitting longer access to information. This situation becomes more complicated with information provided by EMBs with respect to political party and candidate financing in addition to its monitoring.

Electoral Surveys

Various media outlets create electoral surveys, which are important in any electoral process since they tend to sway public opinion towards certain candidates and political parties.

Although these surveys are not directly ordered by the media, they are given important coverage within the electoral process.

Ideally, when publishing surveys, the media should be transparent in explaining how the process was created, for example, explaining how interviews were conducted and the margin of error on their results.

Other Media Technologies

The use of media technology has come to be an important issue in electoral processes. The growth of the Internet has garnered great significance during the last few years, especially in its role of informing voters on electoral issues.

A survey published by International IDEA, outlined the following benefits of the internet:

- Improvement of public information on electoral processes.
- Speeds the transmission of electoral results.
- Facilitates the exchange of information between EMBs and other users.
- Reduces the costs of information and increases its efficiency.
- Strengthens participation in democratic processes.
- Can be used for electoral registration.

The benefits of using the Internet in electoral processes are evident. An admirable example of electoral information, not only at a national but international level, is the SINE program of the Electoral Tribunal of Panama which provides electoral information to practically all countries of Latin America and most recently Asia, Europe, and Africa. The Internet has allowed electoral information to be considered global due to its easy access.

It is important to mention that in Chile these technologies have been used to increase the array of information for voters. Using the Internet, users can find various mechanisms to participate in the electoral process, such as the location of the polling station, times, maps, and other electoral news.

The Electoral Service of Chile has used the following networks:

Vota Mejor: this program summarizes all the information that voters need on how, where, and when to vote in addition to many frequently asked questions. In addition, on the same page, there is a space where voters can register their ID number and find information on the location of their polling station, as well as maps using Google Maps, with an option to find the most convenient route to their station. The data is provided by the Electoral Service.

Mapcity.com: is a complimentary service that easily facilitates finding the location of a polling station using Twitter and the program Mapcity (@mapcity) by sending private messages which say "SERVEL" (Servicio Electoral) followed by the ID number of the voter. In seconds, the voter can receive a response with directions to the polling station and a link to a map of the area.

Prior to voting, one needs to know whom to vote for. In order to better inform voters on their selection, there are websites that connect different instruments such as surveys, interviews, or information on the programs of each candidate.

Votainteligencia.cl: is an independent “a-political” initiative that works to promote public policy and proposals that improve the development of democracy. On the web, voters can find documents and opinion columns. If voters are still unsure of their candidate selection, they can run through a test that predicts who their ideal candidate would be or their “political other half.”

Electoral.cl: is a similar proposal, which is also independent, and comprised by professionals and experts in the area of electoral processes, as explained by the web page. Here voters can find news and a complete look at electoral surveys and studies, in addition to electoral laws.

Tedoymivoto.cl: is a website created by the Foundation to Alleviate Poverty, where using slogans such as, “If I vote for you, will my child be able to finish their education?”. The page looks to emphasize social policy as proposed by a particular candidate.

National Library of Congress: also provides special electoral information by collecting data on the “regional panorama” on each of the administrative divisions of the country.

Elecciones.gov.cl: is a government website where voters can find a complete registration of elections since 1989.

Emol.com (El Mercurio newspaper): the newspaper developed its own special edition on the 2009 Presidential Elections, where voters were able to find the latest election news in addition to other important information. For example, voters found interactive features on the profiles of each of the four presidential candidates as well as an electoral map for the candidates to Congress.

The Media as a Recipient of Electoral Propaganda

Electoral propaganda, created by political parties and candidates to present to voters their platform, has been regulated by electoral legislation for quite some time. This legislation looks to guide the media in providing pluralistic access and set reasonable tariffs for the corresponding propaganda. The work of the media is important to determine whether its role will be active or passive in the electoral campaign.

In general, electoral propaganda is limited to specific campaign times and entails traditional media outlets such as television, newspapers, and radio.

Two types of television media exist, the first which is traditional, and the second which is paid for by candidates and political parties. The latter, which is used most often, establishes a period so that all political parties and independent candidates can have free access to the media in a proportional manner with respect to the amount of votes received in the most recent election.

There is no doubt that this system significantly reduces election costs since it is the most expensive medium to use.

In the Chilean case, this period of free access resulted as a gravitating issue to electoral processes, especially when one recalls the plebiscite in 1988.

In addition, it seems to be that traditional mass media is losing the importance that it used to hold in this area. The main reason for this step back is the gradual incorporation of media technology through Internet networks that have been transforming this process due to the free and easy access it provides to political parties and candidates.

This issue should be considered in the next changes to electoral legislation, as has been done in many other countries.

Another current and future issue is the role of the media in the primary elections of political parties. In practice, this issue and that of electoral political propaganda conspire towards limiting the time that electoral propaganda has in general.