

Propaganda and Political Scandals: Evidence from El Salvador*

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Propaganda contributes to the stability of authoritarian regimes by helping convince citizens of the capacity and competence of the leader (Guriev and Treisman 2019). Successful authoritarian leaders use propaganda outlets to manipulate information in at least three ways: to selectively attribute positive news to the regime and negative news to other actors, to distract from negative news and scandals by covering different stories, and to manipulate the reference point of negative news to make it appear less bad (Adiguzel 2023).

We present evidence of governments’ use of propaganda outlets to counter scandals resulting from journalists’ investigations. We focus on the response of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele’s propaganda machine to an investigation into his negotiations with violent gangs by El Faro (a reputable investigative journalism outlet). We use 9,098 newspaper articles published by El Salvador’s three most important newspapers –*La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Diario de Hoy* (elsalvador.com) and *El Mundo*– and the most prominent propaganda outlet, the state owned *Diario El Salvador*, one month before and one month after the publication of El Faro’s investigation on August 23, 2021. These articles were collected by the Machine Learning for Peace (MLP) project and classified according to their partisan slant using a Transformer-based model developed for this application.

Our findings suggest that the response of Bukele’s propaganda outlet to media scandals consists on increasing pro-government coverage to selectively attribute positive news to Bukele and his government in an attempt to distract citizens from the scandal. In particular, we find that:

- The propaganda outlet, unlike the mainstream media, do not cover the scandal itself: the publication of a damaging investigation into Bukele’s negotiations with gang leaders by a reputable investigative journalism outlet.
- The propaganda outlet increase the publication of pro-regime news immediately after publication: The share of pro-government articles increases immediately after the publication, as does the share of pro-government articles directly mentioning the president or his party.

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- The propaganda outlet cover protests at a lower rate after the publication of the investigation, although there is no change in the coverage of other civic space events.

These results indicate a clear intention of using the propaganda outlet as a means to attempt to control the narrative as a response to damaging journalistic investigations. This response rests on two key strategies: moving past the investigation to report about other news and reporting on positive stories about the president and his government.

Related Research

Prior research on how authoritarian leaders lead with public dissent has focused on two broad strategies. Coercive strategies are designed to silence and/or discourage dissent. These include the use of legislation to censor or curtail media freedom (Adiguzel, Romero, and Wibbels 2023; Lee and Chan 2023), takeovers of mainstream media outlets (Adiguzel 2023), prosecution of journalists and newspapers, and violence against journalists and media outlets either directed or condoned by the government (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Hughes and Vorobyeva 2021). Informational strategies, on the other hand, rely on the control of information typical among “informational autocrats” (Gurieva and Treisman 2019). These are based on the rational use of propaganda for information manipulation: selective attribution, reference point manipulation, and agenda-setting (Adiguzel 2023). Selective attribution refers to attributing positive news to the government while blaming other actors for the negative news. Reference point manipulation consists on given context to bad news in ways that make them appear less negative. For example, reporting on national crime statistics while adding references to similar countries with worse indicators. Finally, agenda setting seeks to distract from negative reporting by focusing on other topics, specially by providing positive coverage of other government actions. These two sets of strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. More often than not, informational strategies are employed alongside coercive strategies to achieve the goal of controlling the information environment.

We focus on the use of selective attribution and agenda-setting strategies by propaganda outlets as strategies to flood the informational environment with positive news about the regime to distract from a large-scale scandal. In this context, these strategies consist on publishing and promoting positive stories about the public figure whose reputation was called into question by the damaging publication publishing stories about other kinds of events to stir public attention away from the damaging publication.

Nayib Bukele, Gangs and the Media in El Salvador

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), *Barrio 18 Revolucionarios* and *Barrio 18 Sureños*, the gangs that operate in El Salvador today, are transnational criminal organizations that originated in the United States in the late 1980s (Miguel Cruz 2010). These gangs control entire neighborhoods in the country’s largest cities, using extortion and murder to assert control within their territories. They often fight each other to expand. Their “policing” practices and expansionary fights have contributed to keeping El Salvador’s murder rate among the highest in the western hemisphere over the past two decades.

Combating gang violence is among the top priorities of the Salvadorean electorate. Successive governments have tried heavy-handed and repressive “mano dura” strategies and negotiations to combat gang violence in the past without lasting success (Hume 2007).

Nayib Bukele became the president of El Salvador in 2019, presenting himself as a political outsider promising to fight crime and corruption. Bukele has captured the institutions of justice, harassed the press and reneged on his promise to set up an independent anti-corruption commission. He even attempted a coup on February 9th, 2020. His crowning achievement, however, has been to “eliminate” gang violence through repression and widespread human rights violations, an achievement only made possible through the full capture of Congress and the judiciary. However, before Bukele started his repressive anti-gang campaign, he had actually engaged in secret negotiations with the gangs in an effort to gain electoral support and lower violence (Martínez 2018).

In September 2020, El Faro, one of the most prestigious investigative journalism outlets in Latin America and the oldest online news outlet in Central America, published its first large-scale investigation into Bukele’s negotiation with the gangs (Martínez et al. 2020). This publication described how Bukele’s government had negotiated both a halt in violence and electoral support for his party in the upcoming legislative elections in exchange for concessions for the gangs.

Bukele’s reaction to the 2020 investigation was to launch a spurious investigation into alleged tax evasion by El Faro <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-54408910>. In addition to this legal harassment, El Faro journalists were surveilled using the spyware Pegasus (Gavarrete, Reyes, and Martínez 2022). Shortly after the publication, in October 2020, the government launched *Diario El Salvador*, its own propaganda outlet. While Bukele had masterfully employed social media to get elected and spread his narrative, the creation of *Diario El Salvador* marks the beginning of a more direct attempt at controlling the media environment.

On August 23, 2021, El Faro published the second part of their original investigation into Bukele’s negotiations with gang leaders (Martínez, Cáceres, and Martínez 2021). The reported that Bukele’s negotiations included all three main gangs, and that his government had interfere with a prosecutor’s investigation into the negotiations. This investigation came before Bukele started to fight the gangs directly after their agreement fell apart in March 2022 (Arroyo 2022).

This time, in addition to the legal harassment and surveillance against El Faro and its journalists, Bukele’s government had an additional tool to fight the scandal: propaganda. In this report we explore the ways in which the government relied on propaganda in an attempt at controlling the information environment following this scandal.

Data and Approach

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we assess whether propaganda outlets discuss the investigation by El Faro at all. To do so, we label articles according to whether they mention key actors involved in the investigation: Bukele and his party, the opposition, and the relevant gangs.

The second step of our analysis focuses on the use of selective attribution and agenda-

setting strategies by the propaganda outlet. First, to assess whether El Faro’s investigation triggers an increase in pro-Bukele articles, we train a Transformer-based model with hand-coded data on pro-, neutral-, and anti-government coverage.¹ We labeled articles as “anti-government” when they directly criticize an existing policy, law, official statement, or government member. We also label articles as “anti-government” when they praise opposition parties/members or cover bad situations that arise from government (in)action. We label articles as “pro-government” when stories praise government policies or report favorably about government members. Any story criticizing the opposition party or its members is coded as “pro-government”. All articles that do not fit these categories are coded as “neutral”. The resulting model is accurate in 86% of out-of-sample tests.

The resulting classification allows us to detect changes in the overall bias of newspaper articles and to assess the use of the selective attribution and agenda-setting strategies by propaganda outlets. An increase in pro-government coverage may be a result of the application of either (or both) strategies. To begin disentangling them we look at whether pro-government articles mention him or his party, in order to evaluate the use of the selective attribution strategy to boost the regime’s image.

Finally, to analyze changes in reporting of civic space-relevant news that may be indicative of the use of the agenda-setting strategy, we rely on the Machine Learning for Peace project data, which labels articles according to a list of 20 civic space event categories.² Our analysis focuses on reporting on corruption, security force mobilization, arrests, raids, states of emergency, and protests. El Faro’s investigation presents details on the terms of the negotiations with the gangs, as well as the steps his government took to procure impunity for Bukele and his aids. Corruption, therefore, is an event category where we could potentially expect changes in reporting: propaganda outlets should decrease their coverage of corruption or maintain/increases their coverage of corruption of the opposition. Mobilize security, arrests, raids and states of emergency are event categories that deal with government action to fight crime and we should expect increases in reporting of these events by propaganda outlets if they are trying to shift the focus away from the findings of the investigation. Finally, propaganda outlets would have an incentive to diminish their coverage of any public displays of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, so their coverage of protests should decrease, with respect to the coverage of protests by mainstream media. After all, authoritarian governments are sensitive to expressions of collective action such as protests (Lorentzen et al. 2013; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013).

We look at whether the publication of El Faro’s investigation is associated with changes in the daily share of articles per source that:

- mention key actors: Bukele, gangs, El Faro and the two largest parties of the opposition (FMLN and ARENA),
- are classified as pro-government or as anti-government,
- are classified as pro-government and that mention Bukele, his party (*Nuevas Ideas*), or either of them,

¹The training data was hand-coded by a team of investigative journalists from *Revista Gato Encerrado*.

²For a more detailed description of each event type as well as the classification model, visit <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/mlp-devlab/>.

- are devoted to a specific event category.

Results

First, we assess whether propaganda outlets discussed the investigation by El Faro in the days following the publication. We do so by comparing the share of articles with mentions of key actors of the investigation which were published by the propaganda outlet and the mainstream newspapers one month before and one month after El Faro's publication. The key actors of interest are: Nayib Bukele, and his party (Nuevas Ideas), the opposition (FMLN and ARENA), the gangs, and El Faro. We find that there are no differences in the rate at which the propaganda outlet mentions all but one of the key actors, compared to mainstream media. The share of articles published by the propaganda outlet which mention El Faro is about 1 percentage point *lower* that of mainstream newspapers. Mainstream newspapers were quick to amply El Faro's findings from the very next day.³

Next, we analyze the strategies pursued by the propaganda outlet to fight the scandal. First we look at changes in the relative bias of the articles published by propaganda and mainstream outlets before and after El Faro's investigation. Figure 1 presents our results. We find that the daily share of articles with pro-government content published by the propaganda outlet increases by 3.4 percentage points. Similarly, the daily share of articles with critical content published by the propaganda outlet decreases by 7.5 percentage points. In other words, mainstream newspapers increase their critical coverage of the regime while the propaganda outlet increases their pro-government coverage. Another way of seeing this is by looking at changes in the relative bias of these media outlets measured as the ratio of pro-government to critical articles. The difference in the relative bias ratio between the propaganda outlet and mainstream newspapers increases by 0.35, or a 42.7% increase from the month before El Faro's publication.

³For example, La Prensa Gráfica published an abridge version of El Faro's investigation on August 24, 2021: <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Gobierno-de-Bukele-negocio-con-las-tres-pandillas-de-El-Salvador-e-intento-esconder-la-evidencia-20210823-0077.html>

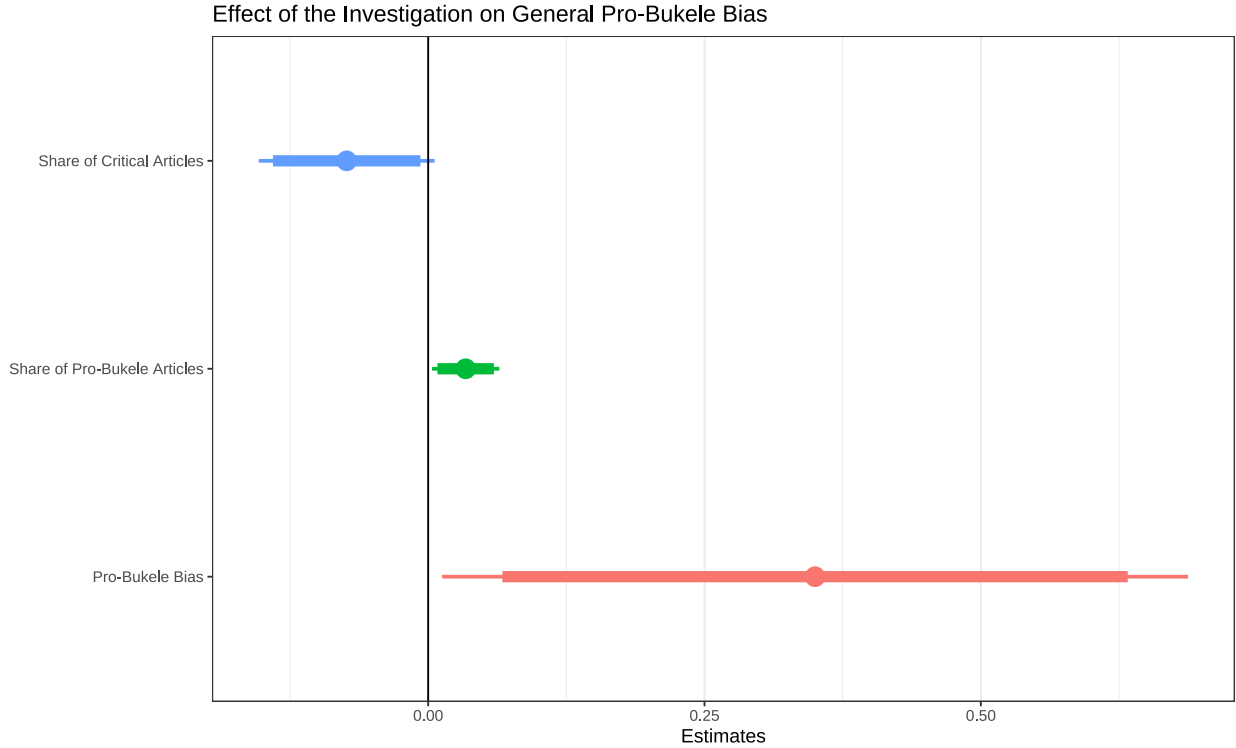


Figure 1: Marginal effect of El Faro’s Investigation on Propaganda Outlets’ General Pro-Bukele Bias

This increase in pro-government articles published by the propaganda outlet may be due to the use of the selective attribution strategy, pro-government articles mention Bukele and his party at a higher rate. Alternatively, they could be due to the implementation of an agenda-setting strategy, seeking to post positive news about the state of the country in an effort to distract the public. To explore the degree to which these strategies were employed we look at changes in the daily share of pro-government articles that mention Bukele or his party published by propaganda and mainstream outlets before and after El Faro’s investigation. Figure 2 presents our results. We find that the difference in propaganda versus mainstream newspapers’ daily share of pro-government articles that mention Bukele, Bukele’s Party (Nuevas Ideas) or either increases by 2, 1.7 and 3.3 percentage points, respectively. These findings are consistent with the the application of the selective attribution strategy by the propaganda outlet.

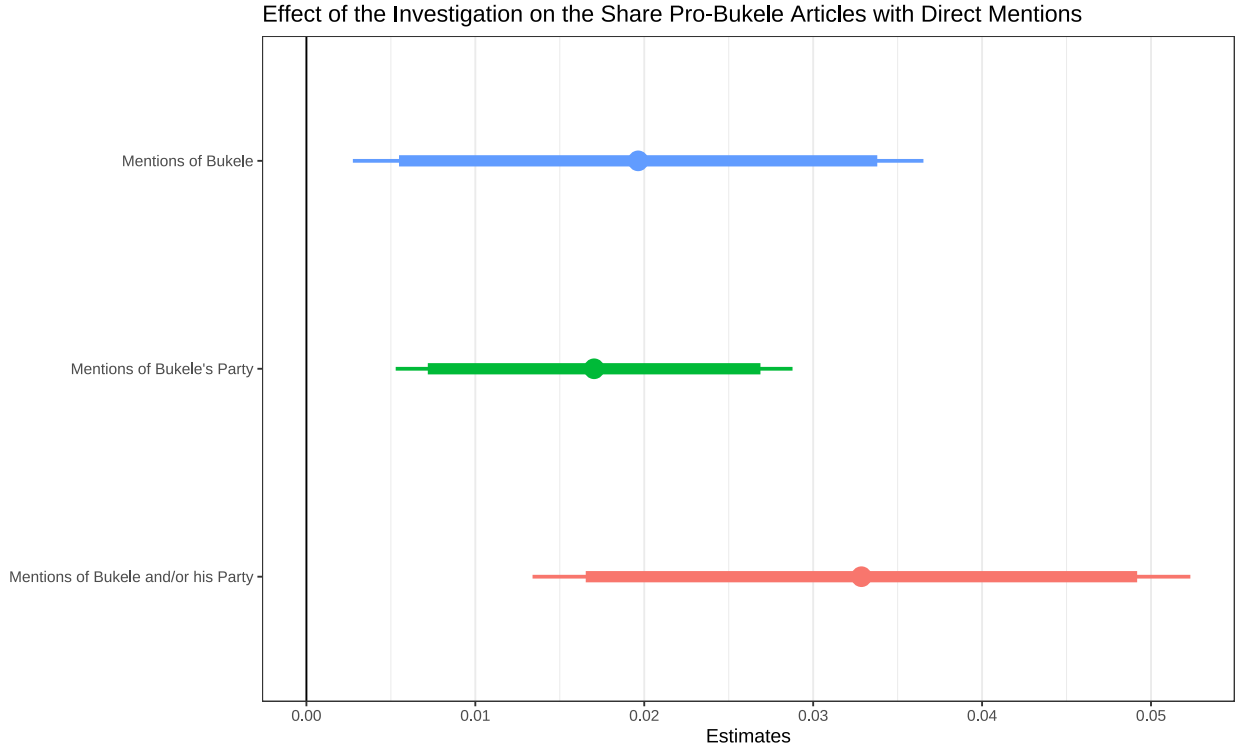


Figure 2: Marginal effect of El Faro’s Investigation on Propaganda Outlets’ Pro-Bukele Bias with Direct Mentions

Finally, we look at another way in which the agenda-setting strategy may be observed, namely, through changes in the substantive coverage of the news by the propaganda outlet vis-a-vis the mainstream media. We do so by looking at changes in the daily share of articles about civic-space relevant events. Figure 3 presents our results. We find no changes in the degree to which the propaganda outlet covers violence (lethal or non-lethal), threats, arrests, raids, instances of censorship, mobilization of security forces, state of emergency, legal actions (e.g., investigations and trials), corruption or activism.

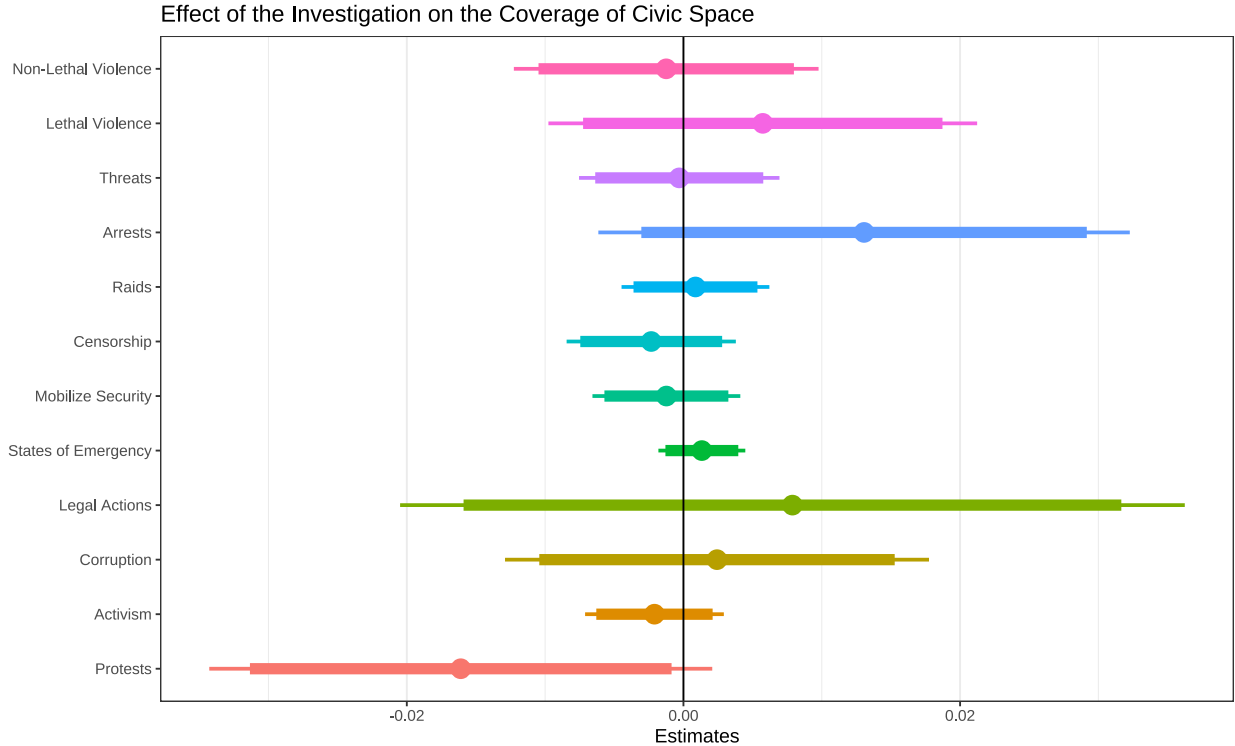


Figure 3: Marginal effect of El Faro’s Investigation on Propaganda Outlets’ Coverage of Civic Space

Conclusion

This report presents evidence of the use of propaganda outlets as a government response to the scandals brought about by journalists’ investigations. We develop and implement a Transformer-based model to classify 9,098 newspaper articles published by the three most important mainstream newspapers of El Salvador and the most prominent propaganda outlet according to their slant. Through our analysis of this data we find that Nayib Bukele’s propaganda outlet increases the publication of pro-government content in an effort to selectively attribute positive news to his regime and distract citizens from the scandal.

These findings underscore the threats to information ecosystems brought about by authoritarian regimes. They also highlight the power of investigative journalism and the importance of the work investigative journalists do under difficult circumstances in backsliding regimes. Additionally, this finding underscore the importance of policy interventions designed to strengthen independent media outlets, through capacity-building training (e.g., on new investigative techniques or improved website security) as well as legal support to resist unfounded attacks. Future research should focus on elucidating the impact of propaganda itself, as well as that of investigative journalism, on citizens’ perceptions of the regime. Future work should also look at the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving the capacity and resilience of independent media outlets.

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