

## UNO Is Number One

### Media Coverage of the Nicaraguan Elections

How did our national media cover the Nicaraguan elections that ended in UNO's surprise victory on February 25? To find out we examined news and opinion pieces in major newspapers, news magazines, and television broadcasts from February 1 through March 31. This period included the final month of campaigning, the election, and the transfer of power that followed. We analyzed 306 news items, including 32 opinion pieces, from ten media outlets: 193 articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*; 16 stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*; and 74 stories (1 hour 55 minutes of airtime) on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts.

#### Major findings:

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■ The Sandinistas got nearly twice as much good press as UNO (43% to 24%) in news stories, though negative evaluations dominated overall.

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■ Evaluations of the Sandinistas varied sharply, from 70% good press on TV news to 52% in the *New York Times*, 25% in the *Washington Post*, and only 11% at the news magazines.

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■ Eight out of every nine opinion polls cited favored the Sandinistas. Overall, horse race news was 92% positive for the Sandinistas but only 40% positive for UNO.

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■ UNO's victory was usually attributed to either U.S. or Sandinista policies. Even after the election, most sources were more sanguine about the FSLN's future prospects than about UNO's.

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■ Nearly two out of three sources criticized the Reagan-Bush policies toward Nicaragua. But assessments became more positive after election day.

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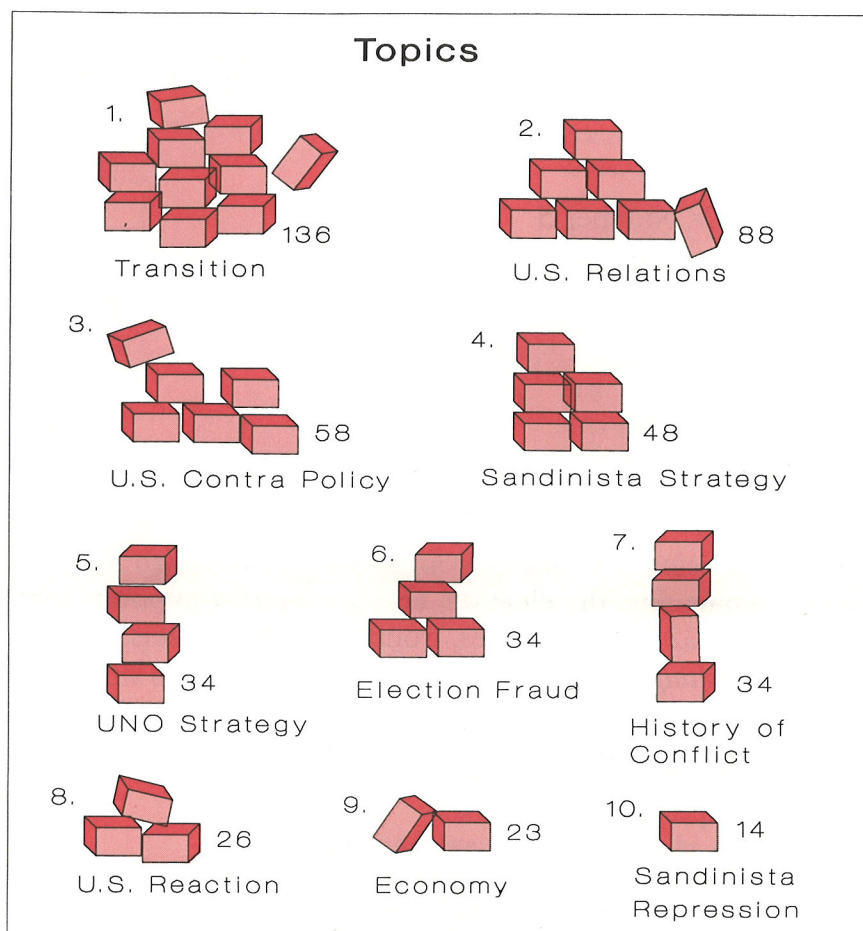


## The Nicaraguan Vote

We analyzed media coverage of the Nicaraguan elections from February 1 through March 31, 1990. This covered the most heated period of campaigning as well as the transfer of power after election day (February 25). We examined all related stories and opinion pieces from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts.

These ten outlets ran 306 news items, including 274 news stories and 32 opinion pieces, during the eight weeks of the study. The *New York Times* printed the greatest number, with 79 items, followed by the *Washington Post* (58), the *Washington Times* (56), and the *Wall Street Journal* (23). The news magazines printed a combined total of 16 stories. *Time* and *U.S. News* each ran six stories; *Newsweek* trailed with four. The three television networks collectively aired 74 stories. NBC broadcast the greatest number (29); ABC followed with 23 and CBS with 22. Despite the similar numbers of stories, however, NBC devoted by far the most airtime to the Nicaragua elections. NBC's 50 minutes of coverage nearly equalled the combined totals of ABC (33 minutes) and CBS (32 minutes).

### Topics



backgrounds of Daniel Ortega and Violeta Chamorro. United States reaction to the elections (26), problems of the Nicaraguan economy (23), and tales of Sandinista repression (14) rounded out the top ten.

## A Tale of Two Countries

The most frequently discussed topic was the transfer of power. The negotiations and agreements struck to transfer power from the Sandinistas to UNO (the National Opposition Union) were brought up in 136 stories. Other news of Nicaragua was closely intertwined with American foreign policy. Thus, U.S. relations with Nicaragua (88) and policies regarding the contras (58) ranked second and third. The next three most popular topics were all related directly to the election itself. Electoral strategies of the Sandinistas were covered in 48 stories; those of UNO were mentioned in 34. Concern over fraud in the election was the topic of another 34 stories. Thirty-four stories also tried to present some historical context for the conflict in Nicaragua, most often by discussing the

### Sources

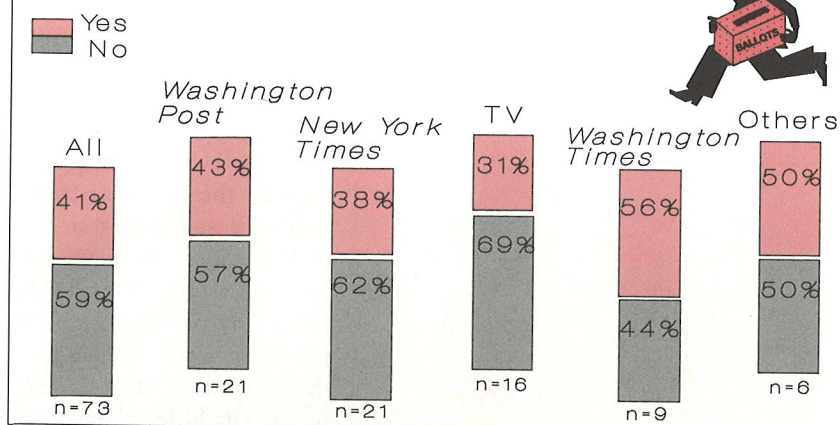
U.S. Government	341
Administration	(244)
Congress	(97)
Sandinistas	337
UNO	315
Contras	101
Other Nicaraguans	98
International Observers	96
Diplomats	58
Polls	36
Media	32
Latin American Governments	22

### Three Part Harmony

Our analysis identified 1633 sources in stories about the Nicaraguan elections. Three voices dominated the debate in roughly equal measure -- the United States, the Sandinistas, and UNO. The largest group of sources came from the U.S. government, which accounted for 341 citations (21 percent of all sources). The Bush administration accounted for 244, while Congress added the other 97. The Sandinista government and its supporters were the second largest group



## Was There Election Fraud?



with 337 mentions. UNO and its supporters were close behind with 315 citations. The contras headed a second tier of sources with 101 citations, slightly ahead of ordinary or politically unaffiliated Nicaraguans, who appeared 98 times. International observers, including Jimmy Carter, accounted for another 96 source citations. Diplomats (58), polls (36), the media e.g. *La Prensa* (32), and other Latin American governments (22) completed the top ten source groups. Among individuals, Daniel Ortega placed first with 90 appearances. His opponent Violeta Chamorro managed only half that number (45), which nonetheless placed her second in the source derby. In third place was Jimmy Carter, who was cited in 30 stories. President Bush was quoted in 29 stories, and Secretary of State James Baker was fifth with 12 citations.

### A Stolen Election?

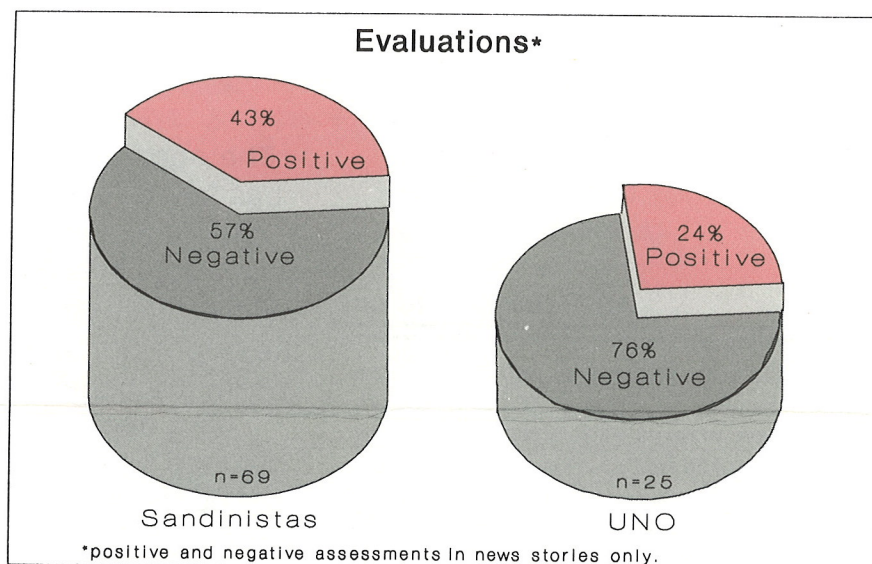
One of the major issues in the campaign was the possibility of election fraud. Most discussions of fraud focused on whether, when, or how the Sandinistas might tamper with the election results. Our analysis identified 73 statements on election fraud. The majority (59 percent) denied that either side acted fraudulently. One in three sources (33 percent) accused the Sandinistas of fraud, compared to only 8 percent who directed their accusations against UNO. For instance, a *Washington Times* reporter observed, "Almost everyone except the government and its most ardent supporters agrees that the process has been

flawed in a number of ways, ranging from intimidation of candidates and campaign workers to unequal distribution of state television time." (2/23)

### Heros and Villains

We noted all assessments of both sides in the election, including evaluations of the two parties and the individuals associated with them. Dimensions on which the contenders were rated included job performance, policy issues, campaign abilities, etc., excluding assessments of the horse race (see below). Opinions were largely negative on the merits of both the Sandinistas and UNO, although the FSLN fared better. Out of 94 evaluations in news stories, the Sandinistas weighed in at 43% good press, compared to only 24% for UNO. But the governing party's margin was somewhat offset by several negative opinion articles. When these were added, the FSLN total dropped to 35% good press and UNO rose slightly to 26%.

### Evaluations\*

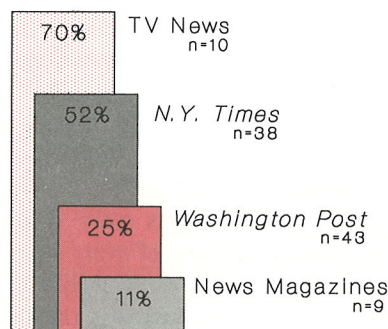


The Sandinistas were faulted repeatedly for their past performance, as evidenced by the failing Nicaraguan economy. For example, *Time's* Johanna McGeary concluded, "That the Sandinistas lost should not be so surprising. They had thoroughly mismanaged an economy that was one of Central America's most prosperous when the FSLN took power in 1979." (3/12) By contrast, they received generally high

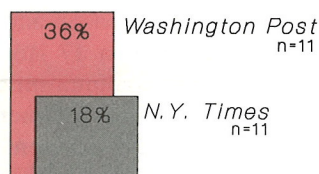


## Good Press by Outlet

### Sandinistas



### UNO



% positive evaluations; outlets not listed had fewer than five evaluations.

marks for their campaign, which was seen as slick, professional and thorough. The UNO leadership, on the other hand, was criticized for a poor campaign performance, Mrs. Chamorro's lack of familiarity with the issues, and even the lack of a clear platform. *Wall Street Journal* reporter David Asman summed up these charges, "Mrs. Chamorro and her UNO confederates are neither skillful politicians nor well versed in policy issues." (2/22)

There were substantial differences in how the various news outlets rated the two contenders. Most evaluations appeared in only two outlets, the *New York Times* (38) and *Washington Post* (43). But these two newspapers differed sharply in the direction of their assessments. In the pages of the *Times*, evaluations of the Sandinistas were about evenly balanced (52% positive vs. 48% negative) while ratings of UNO were more than four to one negative (only 18% positive). UNO fared better in the *Post*, although the coverage there focused mainly on shortcomings in both parties. The *Post* gave only 25 percent positive ratings to the Sandinistas and 36 percent positive to UNO. No other outlet offered more than one or two evaluations of UNO. But the Sandinistas elicited sharply different portrayals at the networks and the news magazines. On television news, seven out of 10 evaluations of the Sandinistas were favorable; in the maga-

**The Republican record in the 1980's is too grim to mention... When it comes to Nicaragua, the White House Republicans are, in short, a natural disaster, like an eighty year old earthquake.**

-Paul Berman  
Op-ed piece  
*New York Times*  
2/28

zines, eight out of nine comments were unfavorable.

Thus, portrayals of the Sandinistas differed dramatically among national media outlets, ranging from better than two-to-one positive ratings on TV news (70%) to balanced coverage at the *New York Times* (52% positive), three to one negative (25% positive) at the *Washington Post*, and only 11 percent positive at the news magazines. UNO, by contrast, received predominantly negative ratings at both the *Times* and the *Post* and almost no ratings elsewhere.

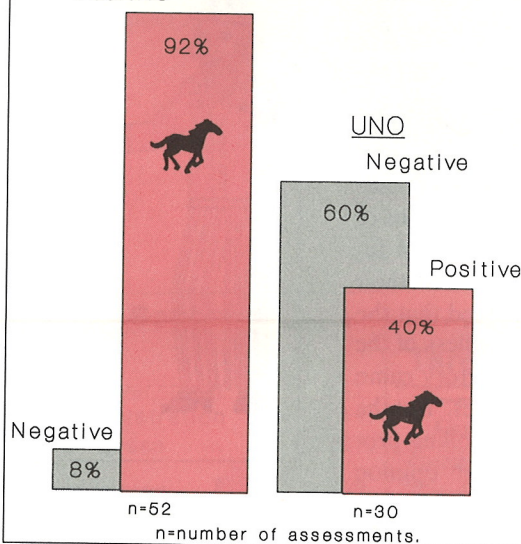
## Calling the Race

As in U.S. election news, a major portion of the coverage focused on the horse race. Handicapping the race (judgments of who is ahead and by how much) made up a significant part of the campaign coverage. When the media judged the horse race position of the two parties, the Sandinistas came out far ahead. Of the 52 horse race assessments of the Sandinista campaign, 92 percent were positive. By contrast, assessments of the UNO campaign found it wanting. Out of 30 evaluations of its electoral potential, 60 percent were negative. Reporters themselves were avid handicappers of the race, delivering 70 percent of all horse race assessments. Reporter assessments did not differ significantly from the opinions of sources quoted in their stories.

## Horse Race Assessments

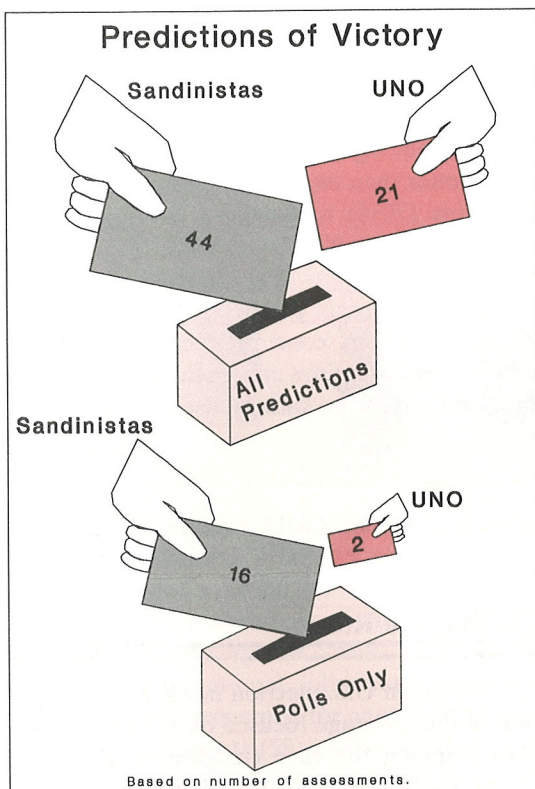
### Sandinistas

Positive



The strong Sandinista party organization, its ability to outspend the opposition, and its strong position in the polls accounted for most of the FSLN's positive evaluations. For instance, Lee Hockstader of the *Washington Post* (2/25) noted, "The Sandinistas...have managed to present themselves...as hip young populists who





understand what the people want.” UNO was frequently faulted for poor organization, scant financing and bad poll placement. Robert Greenberger in the *Wall Street Journal* wrote, “The opposition party...has little organization in the town and nothing to give its residents besides promises.” (2/22)

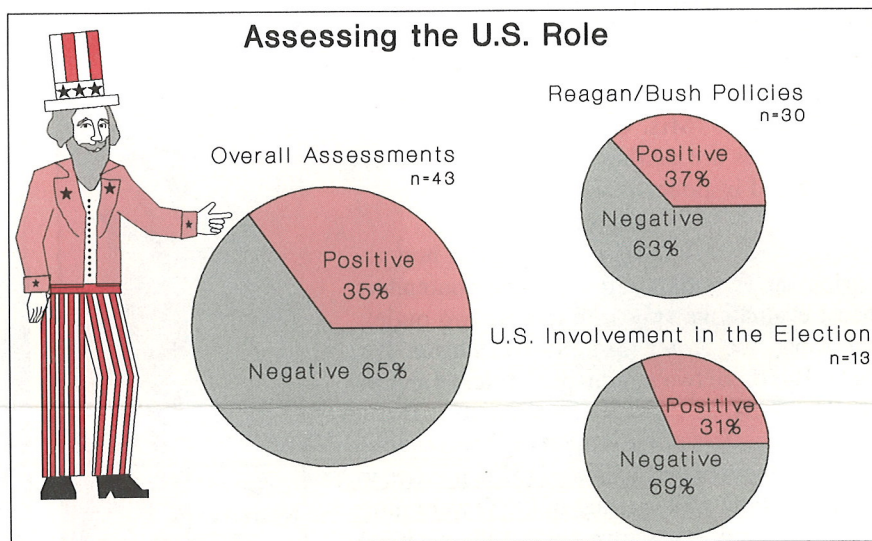
The Sandinistas’ advantage in horse race judgments extended from assessments of their campaign to predictions of the eventual outcome. The coverage included 68 predictions of the election results. Of these, 60 percent favored the Sandinistas, 31 percent placed their money on UNO, and 9 percent argued that the Sandinistas would keep power regardless of the vote count. Most predictions of victory came from representatives of the two parties. But the Sandinistas also had a big edge in polling projections. Of the 18 occasions where opinion polls were cited to predict the outcome, 16 (89%) favored the Sandinistas. Ironically, there was little discussion of the problems involved in polling Nicaraguans. Potential flaws in the polling process were mentioned in fewer than half (47 percent) of the cases where polls were cited.

**The election shows that the romanticism of violent revolution has long passed.**

-Diplomat  
Quoted in *New York Times* 2/27

## UNO's Success Story

Once the votes were tallied, the media tried to explain UNO's surprise victory. Out of 98 explanations offered, nearly half (43%) linked UNO's success to U.S. actions or policies. The same number listed Sandinista actions or policies. Thus, UNO's own characteristics or accomplishments were credited for their success in only one of every seven explanations (14%). The most frequently cited explanation (20 mentions) was the failure of the Nicaraguan economy. U.S. support for the contras was credited in 19 stories, while other hard line policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations were cited in 17 stories. The failure of Nicaraguan communism to deliver the type of society promised was mentioned in eight stories. Anger and resentment over government policies (particularly the draft) was credited in eight stories. The popularity of Violeta Chamorro (7), Sandinista intimidation of voters (6) and fear of U.S. reprisals for electing the Sandinistas (6) completed the of most frequently heard explanations.



## Yankee Go Home

American policy toward Nicaragua also came under review. On the specific issue of U.S. involvement in this election, 69 percent of sources expressed some criticism. Most argued that the U.S. was too involved in the

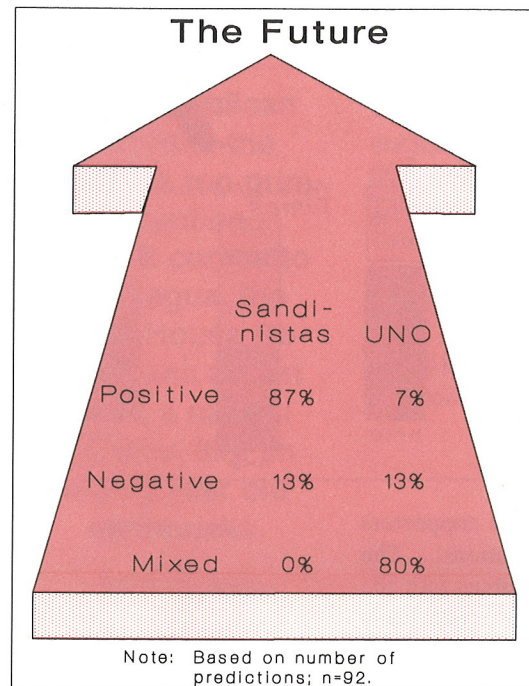


election and may have flawed the process or turned Chamorro into a puppet. For example, *Washington Post* reporter Richard Morin argued (2/21) that United States funding, "may have done little more than deepen voter suspicions about Chamorro's dependence on Washington." A few asserted that the U.S. missed an opportunity in the election, responding too late with too little assistance to insure UNO a fair chance at victory.

The broader policies toward Nicaragua undertaken by Presidents Reagan and Bush also evoked mainly disapproval, by 63 percent negative to 37 percent positive. For example, *Washington Post* reporter Haynes Johnson argued in a signed column, "The guerrillas [the contras] are an attempt to achieve in private what the United States was not willing to attempt to gain in public. As such, they represented another departure from America's founding principles. From defender of revolutions, Cold War America became defender of oligarchs and covert forces." (3/2) Opinion on the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations underwent a rehabilitation after the votes were counted. Prior to election day every assessment of Reagan-Bush policies was negative. After the voting, opinion was split almost evenly (46 percent positive vs. 54 percent negative).

### After the Revolution

Once the votes were tallied, media attention turned to post-election prospects. Eighty-seven percent of sources felt that the Sandinistas would remain a viable force in Nicaraguan politics, compared to only 13 percent who argued that they would be weakened by their loss. UNO's prospects were seen as more clouded. Out of 46 discussions of UNO's future, only seven percent saw unqualified success for the party, and 13 percent were equally confident of its failure. Most of those voicing opinions (80%) felt that UNO could only be successful if certain qualifications could be met. One in four (24%) cited Sandinista cooperation as the prerequisite for UNO's success. The majority (56%), however, identified such external factors as U.S. aid, contra demobilization, and Latin American support.



Among those who offered predictions about the future course of U.S. relations with Nicaragua, 85 percent saw an improving picture. Most of these predictions were made by U.S. officials who foresaw the lifting of trade sanctions and the extension of U.S. aid to the new government. Only one source (2%) foresaw deteriorating relations with Nicaragua; the remaining 13 percent predicted little change in our ties with Nicaragua.

### Opinion Watch

There were 32 opinion pieces (editorials and signed columns) in the sample. The largest number (12) appeared in the *Washington Times*. The *New York Times* followed with eight, the *Washington Post* with six and the *Wall Street Journal* with four. *Time* and *Newsweek* each ran one column on the elections. In most cases opinion pieces added little to the discussion beyond reinforcing the perspectives offered in news stories. For example, most columnists predicted a Sandinista victory. In a few areas, however, opinion pieces contradicted the tone of straight news accounts. First, news stories were three to one negative in assessing Reagan/Bush policies, while opinion pieces ran three-to-two positive. Second, 61 percent of the discussions of election fraud in news stories exonerated the electoral process, while 71 percent of the judgments in opinion pieces argued that there was indeed fraud. The *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Times* were the most skeptical. Finally, opinion pieces differed from news stories in their assessments of the Sandinistas. Their evaluations in news stories were 43 percent positive. In opinion pieces, the FSLN received nine negative appraisals and not a single positive one.

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**The opposition has failed to excite the voters with a reasonable alternative... And the opposition has from the beginning been plagued by internal conflicts and poor organization.**

-Ralph I. Fine  
Op-ed piece  
*New York Times*  
2/21