

Comparing Media Coverage of Opposition to Privatization and Economic Austerity Policies

Paul D. Almeida
UC Merced
palmeida@ucmerced.edu



Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years the developing world has experienced several waves of popular contention against market reforms and welfare state retrenchment. In the past decade, in Latin America alone, major social movement campaigns erupted in every country in the region over public sector privatization and economic austerity policies (Almeida 2007). For scholars and analysts of popular contention and policy changes, this recent upsurge in social movement activity in lesser-developed countries (LDCs) raises important issues in collecting protest event data given that prior studies on media bias and protest reporting focus on advanced industrialized democracies (McCarthy et al. 1996; Smith et al. 2001; Myers and Caniglia 2004). In order to address this shortcoming, I focus here on one major episode of collective action against neoliberal reform in Latin America – the 2002-2003 campaign against public health care privatization in El Salvador. By comparing the coverage of several media and movement sources we can observe the relative strengths of combining multiple reporting agents in gathering information and constructing data sets on social movement activity and policy reforms in the developing world.

The Case: Opposition to Health Care Privatization Policy in El Salvador

The larger study examines one of the longest enduring campaigns against public sector privatization in Latin America – opposition to public health care outsourcing in El Salvador (Almeida 2006). Between September 2002 and June 2003, Salvadoran civil society launched a massive social movement campaign to prevent the privatization of the public health care system (the Salvador Social Security Institute and by extension the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance). The campaign lasted nine months and the movement impeded the privatization process – a rare policy outcome in contemporary Latin America. The campaign to defend health care involved multitudinous street marches and protest actions (i.e., demonstrations, work stoppages, vigils, sit-ins, hunger strikes) in all 14 departments of the country, including the creative *marchas blancas* (white marches) which drew up to 150,000 demonstrators dressed in white (or painted themselves white) to display their solidarity with the public health care profession (See Figure 1). Striking doctors attended patients in make shift encampments in front of the public hospitals as well as sent special medical brigades into rural communities to treat clients.

The Data: Anti-Privatization Protest Events

The dependent variable is the individual protest event defined as three or more people engaged in joint public action (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992) against health care privatization (such as work-stoppages, marches, rallies, vigils and sit-ins). For such studies in collective action research, protest event analysis is employed using primarily newspapers (Rucht, Koopmans and Neidhardt 1999). For this study, four national newspapers were coded for the entire period of the protest campaign (September 2002 through June 2003). In terms of ideological orientation, two of the national newspapers are considered right wing (*El Mundo* and *El Diario de Hoy*), one is center-right (*La Prensa Gráfica*), and one newspaper is left-of center (*Diario Co Latino*). All four newspapers maintain electronic editions online. For this study, I used the original hardcopy versions for coding. In addition, I incorporated chronologies produced by the leading social movement organizations (SMOs) involved in the strike (the public health care labor unions) as well as nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports of the events. In sum, I use four newspaper sources varying in political ideology along with SMO and NGO coverage of the protest events.

In cross-sectional research of protest occurrence and distribution, it is critical to document each protest event. Some analysts argue that using multiple media sources is the best means to achieve this (Almeida and Lichbach 2003; Earl et al. 2004; Myers and Caniglia 2004). In the developing world, national newspapers often do not have the resources to send reporters and communications technology to rural regions as they do in wealthier nations. LDCs with a recent authoritarian past (or that are currently authoritarian) may also censor or directly control reporting by the leading national newspapers in a manner that favors the prevailing government's portrayal of key political events. For these reasons, I have additionally included available reporting of protest events by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and SMOs involved in the conflict. Many NGOs work in rural communities and are connected to larger international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) that can assist local NGOs in financial and organizational resources such as office space and publishing equipment. Hence, local NGOs working close to social movement campaigns and their policy issues increasingly have the capacity to produce their own accounts of events. In this study, I combined several NGO reports to build a single NGO data base of health care protest events.

With a small trained staff and office facilities, SMOs often possess the capacity to generate their own chronologies of protest campaigns. Organizations such as labor unions often produce annual reports of major activities over the past year along with more specialized publications documenting a strike campaign or other significant events. Both NGOs and SMOs may also help to overcome censorship and description bias in national commercial newspapers, while tending to exhibit their own specific limitations. Below, I summarize the comparison of the six sources reporting on the health care campaign in El Salvador in the early 2000s.

When all six sources are combined (four national newspapers, SMO and NGO reports) there were a total of 551 protest events in the master data set. About half of the events (51 percent) occurred outside the capital city (San Salvador) and the protests clustered in the opening three months of the campaign. The national newspapers provided more coverage over the entire duration of the campaign than the SMOs and NGOs (see Figure 2). For NGOs this finding may be explained by the fact that most of the events that NGOs engaged in were solidarity actions and those events largely occurred before December 2002. The SMO chronologies also ended in March 2003, and failed to report events in the waning months of the strike as it moved into final negotiations with the government. At the high point of policy contention, between September and December 2002, there is substantial weekly variation in which individual newspaper reports the most events. This suggests the importance of using multiple sources in terms of casting the widest net in capturing the maximum number of protest events for cross-sectional studies.

Figure 2. Proportion of Weekly Coverage of Health Care Protest by Source.

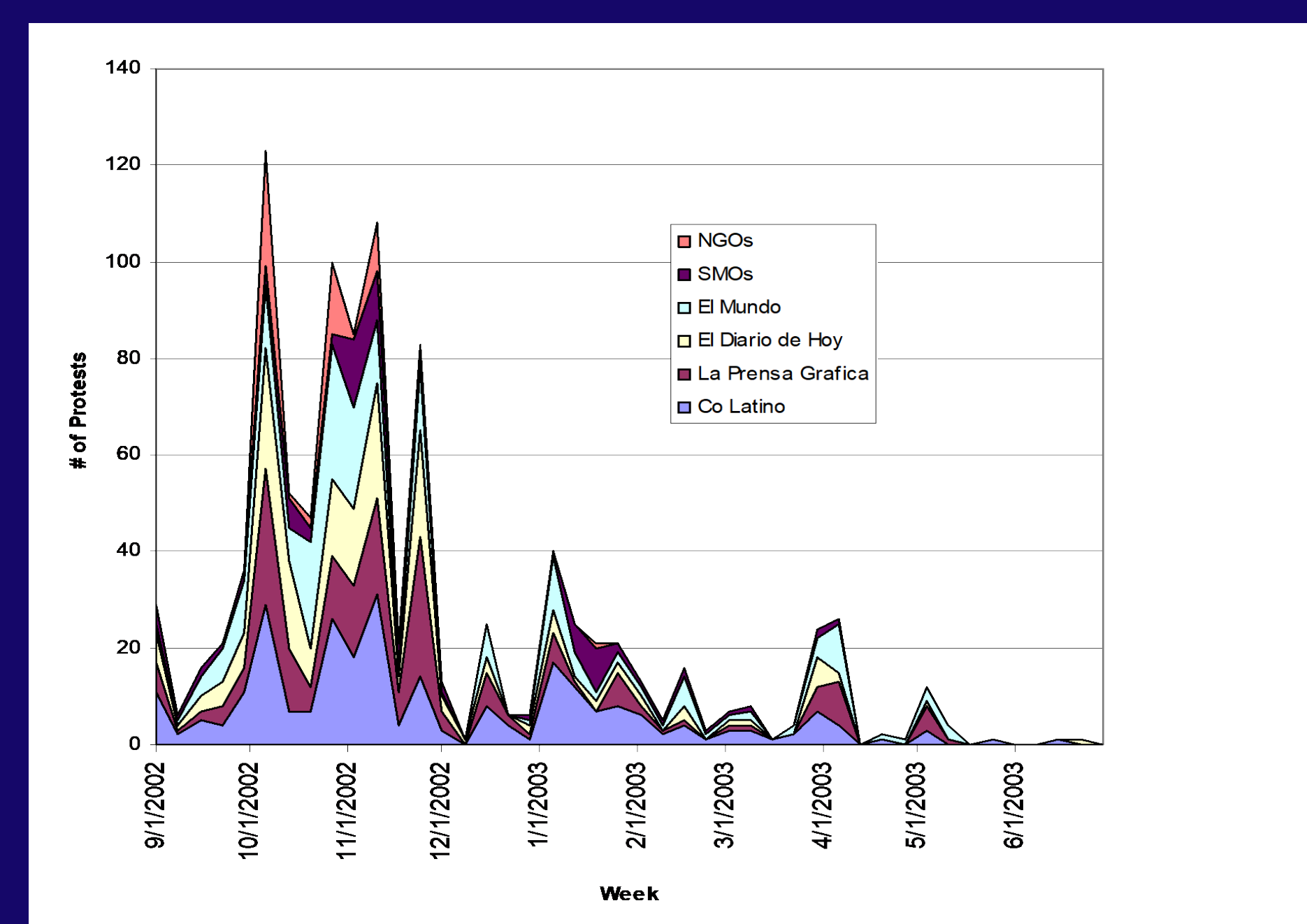
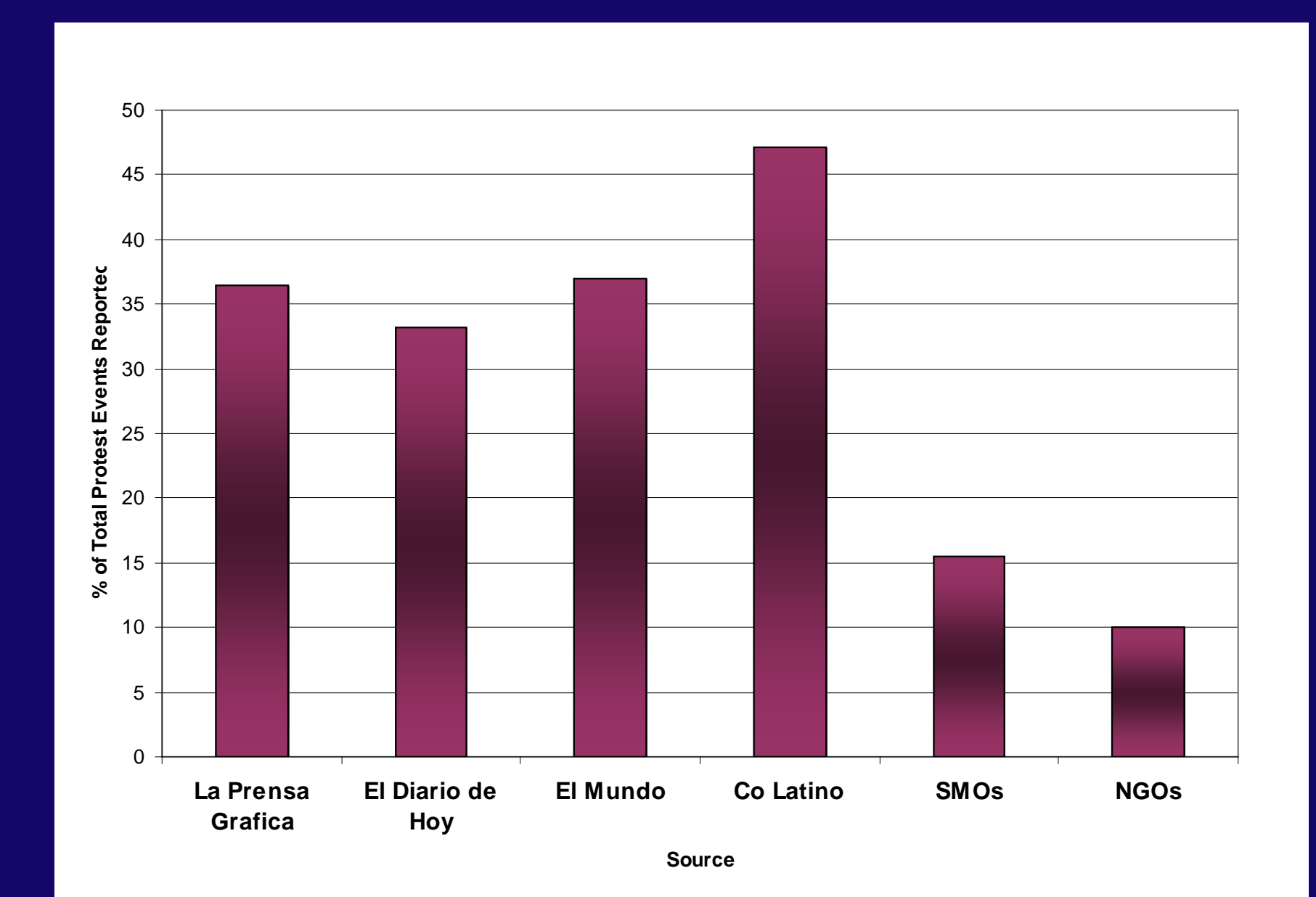


Figure 3 provides information on the percentage of the total 551 events reported by each source. The center-left newspaper, *Co Latino*, reported the greatest number of events, about 10 percent more than all other national newspapers. *Co Latino* has a much smaller budget than its more conservative competitors and is only distributed in the major cities. It averages about 20 pages in length with only color photos on the front page. The other three national newspapers average between 80 and 100 pages in length and are replete with special graphic features such as detailed maps and colored photographs. This finding that the center-left newspaper reports more protest events that are consistent with its ideological orientation (pro government administration of health care services) supports other studies that show the ideological bias of the media source affects the selection of events reported (Mueller 1997). SMOs only reported 15 percent of events in the master data set, while NGOs mentioned 10 percent, respectively.

Figure 3. Percentage of Total Health Protest Events Reported by Source



In examining the different media sources in terms of documenting protest events outside of the capital city, *Co Latino* and NGOs both reported more events outside the capital than inside. Out of all protest events reported by *Co Latino*, 53 percent were outside the capital. 76 percent of all events reported by NGOs took place outside of San Salvador. Even though NGOs only reported 10 percent of all events from the master data set of all events, they appear extremely sensitive in reporting events outside the capital city. This finding may be of special interest to other studies of social movements and policy reforms in LDCs. NGO-derived reports may be especially useful to gauge the level of contention in rural regions and provincial towns that conventional news outlets neglect, partially overcoming the bias to report largely on events in the megacities of the global South. When such NGO reports do not exist, researchers may want to give special attention to the newspaper with the greatest ideological affinity to the movement to best capture contention outside of the nation's capital. These observations are especially important for research on the subnational variation of social movement activity over policy change. News sources that focus primarily on the capital will miss much of the local level variation in movement activity. In this case, the SMO data derived from a labor union and was likely biased in reporting events in the capital city where the majority of its affiliates are located and where many strike actions occurred.

Figure 4. Percentage of Protest Events Reported Outside of Capital City

