

How can sports events alter public opinion on politics? Evidence from Colombia*

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Abstract

Human behavior is the result of a wide array of variables that help build a nation's identity. In the case of Colombia, football (and the activities that derived from it) constitutes a major cultural phenomenon. Therefore, we sought to explore how a high-profile football event can alter individual political views. To do that, we estimate the impact of the elimination of the national football team from the Russia 2018 World Cup. Our main findings suggest a 10.2 percentage-point decrease in confidence as measured by the governance index from the football match, based on a difference-in-differences analysis.

Keywords: Sports, Football, World Cup, Public Opinion

JEL Classification: Z20, F50, F63

1 Introduction

In Latin America, football is an important part of the local culture (Alabarces, 2003). The sport has an effect on the way individuals carry out their everyday activities. Football is also intrinsically linked to politics (Chen et al., 2020), stability (Ronconi, 2022) and, cultural identity (Depetris-Chauvin, et al. 2020). In this context, major football events may have a fundamental role in guiding behavior and specific public and political opinion (Bernal, 2010). In particular, the magnitude and relevance of the FIFA World Cup in the Latin American region provides the unique opportunity to study the sudden impact of such events on the general perceptions about political identities.

Our paper seeks to establish the impact of high-profile a sport event on public political opinion in Colombia, from the perspective of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. To understand its impact, we take advantage of the timing of the match in which Colombia was suddenly eliminated from the tournament and utilize a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences strategy using Peru as the counterfactual case.

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We use the 2018 Latin Barometer survey, which features information about several general-interest matters.

The link between the sporting much and public political opinion is measured using a governance index. We construct the variable using four questions which elicit the respondents' opinion on the government's actions. Our results show a 11 point decrease in our governance index, which translates into a negative change in public opinion on the government stemming from the national team's elimination from the World Cup. We further examine heterogeneous effects depending on the gender of the respondent and their level of education. Both men and women are similarly affected by the match but it had a higher impact on those respondents without higher education.

Since its emergence in Latin America in the 1980s, football has gone from being a mere set of physical skills to becoming an economic, sociologic, and political force (Rinke, 2007). Rinke, Ruiz, and Hofmann (2007) argue that the sport's relevance stems from the fact that it lends itself to be played almost anywhere, the emotions it stirs, and its ritualistic nature. Gómez and Delgado (2016), on the other hand, set forth all the actors who take part in the sport as "builders of tradition" (Depetris-Chauvin, et al. 2020; Acuña Gómez & Acuña Delgado, 2016). Therefore, a big sporting such as the elimination from the World Cup has the potential to impact on public opinion. In particular, the 2018 Colombian elimination happened on July 3rd after a match with England. The English football team defeated Colombia 4-3 on penalties after a tied match. The reaction to this match has led us to consider the relationship between sports in Colombia -and its cultural significance- and their possible impact on public opinion.

This study relates to two strands of literature. First, a number of papers have explored the impact of sports events on the lives and beliefs of individuals. Lindo, Swensen, and Waddell (2012) estimate the impact of college sports events in the development of academic life and find that negative outcomes of sports events cause a significant reduction in men's vs women's performance. Similarly, Healy et al. (2010) estimate changes motivated by sports events in the public opinion in terms of political involvement and approval of the government in an academic context in the U.S. The authors point out that positive outcomes in college sports events led to a 2.4% rise in the rate of approval of the President, and an even higher increase for individuals qualified as more intense fans. Furthermore, using a randomized design, Chen and MacDonald (2020) study the effects of sports-related negative or positive change on the confidence and satisfaction around the Chinese Government. They conclude that a positive performance at high-profile sports events behaves as implicit propaganda for the current administration through the psychological effects they trigger. However, none of these studies have considered a nation-wide event of the size and magnitude of the world cup.

Second, the research relates to the growing body of work examining the role of football in societies. Two recent papers study the role of football on nation building and social cohesion. Depetris-Chauvin, et al. (2020) consider the role of football in the creation of national identities and conflict reduction in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors find that individuals are more likely to identify with their nationality (compared to their ethnicity) a number of days after their national team's victories. Individuals are also more likely to trust other ethnic groups. Similarly, Ronconi (2022) analyzes the impact of Latin American football rivalries on social cohesion and finds that an increase in the days after a match.

Understanding the role of high profile sports events on the formation of public opinion is relevant from an economic development perspective. Keefer and Scartascini (2022), argue that confidence is key to generate growth in Latin American countries. The lack of confidence is a source of obstacles for growth and public policy design effectiveness and enforcement. Sudden changes in public opinion can have an effect in the achievement of policy makers' plans.

The rest of the work is organized as follows: in the next section, we set forth the background; section 3 describes our data; section 4 explains the methodology; section 5 states our results; section 6 lays out an event study analysis, and section 7, finally, offers our conclusions.

2 Background

2.1 The Construction of Public Opinion

Over the course of the last decades, the economic literature has proposed new ideas focusing on understanding human action based on behavior observation. Thaler (2016), for example, proposes the notion that human behavior is not completely rational. Instead, there are a great number of variables that should be considered if we aim to understand decisions made by human beings in specific situations. Thaler's theory includes a component in which people's decision-making process is based on a set of expectations regarding the consequences of potential decisions, as well as many other exogenous variables that can affect them in the future.

If expectations are taken into account such as a person's beliefs surrounding a future event and their potential impact on the person's behavior, external stimuli should also be considered in order to understand potential changes (Pinquart et al., 2021). In particular, exogenous shocks might alter individuals' perceptions. Claus and Nguyen (2018), for example, conclude that changes brought about by emotional reactions are relevant for individuals' making certain decisions around consumption.¹

When measuring perception through public opinion, therefore, it is important to consider the impact of cultural elements. McKenna (2019) states that individuals' beliefs and perspectives are formed by virtue of a process of cultural cognition, meaning that perceptions are constructed in a biased cultural range (McKenna, 2019). Glynn et al. (1999) state that public opinion can be affected by cultural and psychological effects, which allows us to argue that a cultural event in a given society has an effect, through psychological mechanisms, on public opinion. Importantly, in an economic and political context, Lischka (2015) argues that public opinion can predict economic performance.

2.2 The Role of the Colombian Football National Team

As in many Latin American countries, the Colombian national football team is a fundamental part of the Colombian identity and national sentiment (Watson, 2022; Dávila Ladrón de Guevara, 2014). In a country with a small number of unifying symbols

¹The theory proposed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) is considered for the assessment of instances of potentially rational behavior.

that are not associated with tragedy, Dávila Ladrón and Londoño (2003) point to the ritualistic nature of the sport as an important reason for its popularity and political significance. Specifically, according to the authors, football provides a tangible way for Colombians to unify as behind a single cultural identity. In fact, in a survey commissioned by the Interior Ministry in 2014, respondents stated that the importance of football in Colombia derived from its capacity to unify people (Ministerio del Interior, 2014). This fact also makes it appealing for politicians to use the sport in their discourse.

Highlighting football’s current weight in Colombian affairs, Hernández (2017) reveals the strong influence that occurred between the national football team with the political context during the 2001 América Cup. The team’s image was used for the campaign around the peace negotiations in progress during that period. Thus, the author claims that football is a modern cultural phenomenon that reflects the development of a variety of issues in the new Latin American societies, Colombia is no exception.

In the Colombian context, the 2018 World Cup elimination was a big upset for the national team and the fandom. Following a tie caused by last minute Colombian goal, England defeated Colombia on the penalties phase. Given the good performance in the first round and high expectations placed on some of the players, the national sentiment was overall low. In an editorial opinion titled “Why do we suffer so much for the elimination of the Colombian National Team?” from El Tiempo news paper, the author exposed how this event left many individuals feeling depressed and compared the feeling to a break-up from a relationship (Lombardo, 2018). Additionally, a number of riots were reported on the night of the matches in the capital city. Similarly, Watson (2022) established a significant social media response to the match and a change in the rhetoric in the next few days. In this scenario, quantifying how the event affected people’s views on social, cultural and political opinion, however is an open question.

3 Data

3.1 Latin Barometer Data Set

We use the 2018 Latin Barometer survey, which compiles data based on representative samples of the current populations of 18 Latin American countries. The survey aims at assessing the democratic and economic development in the region using opinion and behavior indicators (Latin Barometer, 2018). We rely on data from Colombia and Peru.

The surveys have 1200 data points per country and are structured around closed questions, and the dataset after cleaning has 1075 observations. The information includes the date when the survey was carried out, which, for Colombia and Peru, goes from June 6 to August 26, 2018.² We limit our study to the period going from June 29 to July 9, 2018. This range includes the day when the Colombian national team was eliminated from the Russia World Cup, that is, July 3, 2018. After segmenting the dates to 10 days before to 5 days after the event, the total sample comprises 1694 observations.

²With 1200 observations per country.

3.2 Governance Index

The main dependent variable is a composite index constructed with several questions relating to respondents’ opinions on the government using the OECD’s manual (2008). In particular, we consider whether the survey participants value the following four policy dimensions: “Approval of policy making by the government as headed by the President”, “Confidence in political parties”, “Confidence in the Judiciary”, and “Confidence in the Armed Forces”. All answers are coded such that lower values represent a higher opinion on the subject in a scale from 1 to 5.

We then proceed to apply the re-scaling or Min-Max normalization. Equation 1 shows the method’s structure. This type of standardization considers the value range and transform it in one value from 0 to 1, using the maximum and minimum values in each data sets as a benchmark. ³

$$y_i = -\frac{x_i - \min(x_i)}{\max(x_i) - \min(x_i)} \in [0, 1] \quad (1)$$

Second, we aggregate all the answers for each individual. To avoid biasing the construction, all questions have equal weights, and the outcomes are calculated using an arithmetic mean. We multiply our index times -1 such that lower values are associated with lower public opinion. Given that the standardization allowed us to obtain a defined range, we can interpret that the lower values as the more negative is public opinion. ⁴ Moreover, we applied a Principal Component Analysis, and the result shows that both variables follow the same direction. ⁵

3.3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for Colombia and Peru. We additionally compare the means of the various variables using the T-Student test. ⁶ There are no significant differences in the variables regarding age, education level, gender, marital status, main family income, and subjective socio-economic level, used as controls for the purposes of the estimation. There are three notable differences, however. The only variables that show a statistically significant difference in the percentage of respondents who are household heads, whether they have a religious commitment and whether the individuals are currently working. We account for the differences later in the estimation.

³According to the OECD (2008), the standardization carried out by means of this method can induce error when there are outliers or when new data are incorporated that can change the minimum and maximum benchmarks. Nevertheless, these two issues are absent from the data used here, and the outcomes help interpret the results.

⁴This kind of indicator is applied by the UN Development Program, which compiles the human development index following this methodology, except for the aggregation, which is carried out using a geometric mean (UNDP, 2019).

⁵We compare the results with the different indexes, obtaining similar results in terms of sign and significance. These results are available upon request.

⁶The Wilcoxon test was used for non-parametric data, with similar outcomes.

4 Empirical Strategy

We employ difference-in-differences identification strategy to estimate the causal impact of Colombia’s elimination of the 2018 football World Cup on public opinion. We rely on Peru as a counterfactual on individual opinion. The similarities between these two countries’ contexts should be underscored. They both took part in the international competition, but Peru left the competition more than 10 days before Colombia.⁷ In addition, there were no other events that could distort public opinion in either country. Thus, our strategy compares individuals in Peru vs. Colombia, before and after the elimination match. Our identifying assumption is that, in the absence of the elimination of the World Cup, the change in our governance index would not have been systematically different across the two countries. The model specification can be summarized with the following equation:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \gamma Col_i + \lambda Post_t + \delta(Col * Post)_{it} + \nu X + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

In equation 2, Col_i is a dummy where 1 denotes that the individual i was interviewed in Colombia, while $Post_t$ is a dummy where 1 denotes that the individual was interviewed after the football match. Thus, $(Col * Post)_{it}$ will be equal to 1 if individual i was interviewed after the match and zero otherwise. We include a vector of control variables, described by the vector X , which include whether the respondent was male, their age and marital status, whether the person is the household head, if they have received higher education, if they are currently working, and the socio-economic stratification level.

Finally, to further examine the impact of the elimination of the 2018 football World Cup, we consider heterogeneous effects. Specifically, we divide the sample by a number of demographic characteristics: the gender of the respondent, if they have any post-secondary education and whether the individual reports to be currently working. These results are presented in Table 3.

5 Results

Table 2 shows the results for the government index, with and without control variables. It can be observed elimination match triggered an increase in dissatisfaction with and distrust in the current government. The estimation carried out without control variables shows a decrease of 10.2 percentage points in the government index, which entails a worsening view of various government institutions after the elimination. The addition of control variables to the estimation yields similar reduction: a 11.1 percentage point reduction in the variable being studied. Both coefficients are statistically significant at the one percent level.

The results for differentiated effects are presented in Table 3. We first split the sample first by whether the gender of the respondents. The coefficient for the interaction

⁷Peru was eliminated after the team lost their second match against France, played on June 18, 2018. They played an additional match against Australia but with out any chances of continuing to the next round.

between Colombian and period indicator variables are similar for men (0.101 percentage points) and women (0.145 percentage points). Both coefficients are statistically significant at the one percent level. We then consider the respondent’s level of education, our findings indicate that those individuals who do not possess higher education are 15 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). In contrast, the estimate for those respondents who have higher education is a -5.3 percentage point change in the government index without significant effects.⁸

6 Parallel trends

The assumption of parallel trends must be validated in order to implement the difference-in-differences. To assess the assumption, we conduct the event study analysis for the Colombian public opinion and for several other variables. Equation 3 represents the estimation, where Y_{it} represent the composite index of interest and D_t denotes the leads and lags for the event, respectively. Throughout our estimation, we set the match as the period 0. As before, X represents a vector of individual level controls

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \sum_{n=-q}^{-1} \rho_n D_t + \sum_{n=0}^5 \delta_n D_t + \vec{\nu}X + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

The results are shown in Figure 1, which shows that, in the periods before the event, a behavior is identified which is not statistically different from zero. After the event, it can be observed that most show a negative trend in behavior, which reflects the fact that the behavior (in this case, the view of the government) is disturbed after the event relative to the pre-event periods, and with several ratios statistically different from zero.

Finally, in Appendix Figures 1 and 2, we consider the possibility that the social disruption caused by the match was responsible for the found effects on public opinion. We particularly conduct an event study analysis for the number of robberies and the reports of domestic violence in the days before and after the match. As shown in both graphs, we find no evidence of statistically significant changes in reports of either type of crime.

7 Conclusions

The role of public opinion as regards the political realm is fundamental for societies. Changes in opinion can affect the individuals’ behavior, with consequences in areas where they should have no or little bearing. Some empirical works have estimated how these changes have been reflected in variables related to consumer spending, trust, and sentiment. However, one of the most relevant aspects, which this work covers, are the mechanisms through which changes in public opinion take place, with the news being among the best-known ones. The role of this football is undeniable.

⁸We also divide the sample by the respondents’ employment status. These results are available upon request.

Focusing on the relationship between football and public opinion, we estimated the effects of the Colombian National team from the 2018 World Cup. The results show that the world cup alters individuals' perception of government-related issues. We find an effect of ten percentage points in the government opinion index. However, no effect was found on other economic and social outcomes, which suggests no intermediate mechanisms. Thus, it is possible to show not only that there were changes in public opinion in terms of dissatisfaction, but also that the results of the estimations are consistent with the theoretical work referenced. Likewise, the results should only be interpreted in the context of Colombia, but they could be similar in countries or places where football plays a key role in cultural development.

This paper underscores the importance of sports in policy decisions. According to Keefer and Scartascini (2022), the effectiveness of public policies is linked to the trust individuals display in said policies and the actions deployed, depending on whether their view is positive or negative. Thus, public opinion should be considered in projects in which the individuals' perception plays a key role.

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Figures

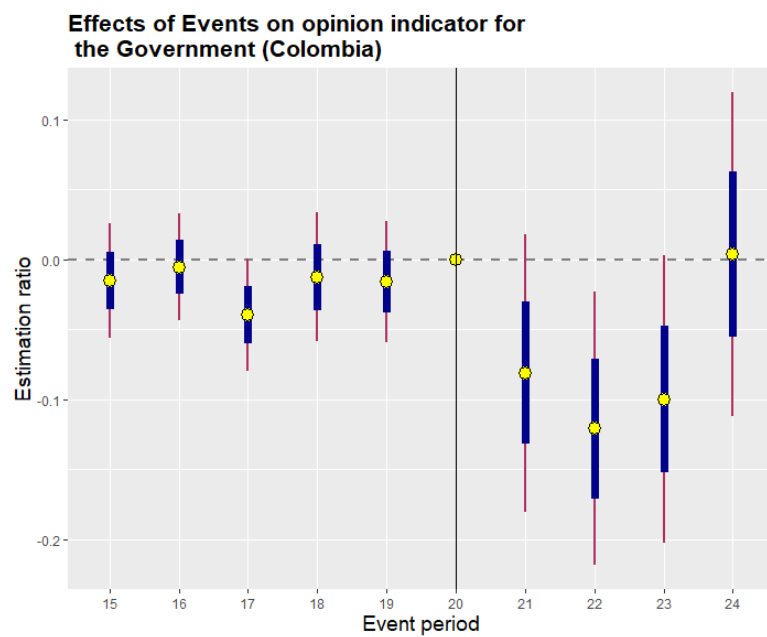


Figure 1: Source: Latinbarómetro and author's calculations.

Tables

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Colombia (1)	Peru (2)	Difference (3)	P value (4)
Panel A: Demographics				
Age	36.516	37.754	-1.238	0.168
Completed years of education	11.235	11.442	-0.207	0.465
Higher Educ.	0.351	0.382	-0.031	0.317
Male respondent	0.481	0.517	-0.036	0.247
Head of household	0.497	0.451	-0.046	0.022
Married	0.524	0.541	-0.017	0.591
Religious commitment	0.475	0.501	0.026	0.094
Panel B: Resources				
Subjective socioeconomic level	3.596	3.581	0.001	0.797
Internet home	0.391	0.425	-0.061	0.263
Automobile	0.198	0.201	-0.003	0.941
Panel C: Employment variables				
Self-employed	0.412	0.388	0.024	0.432
Salaried employee	0.192	0.232	-0.04	0.123
Currently student	0.076	0.075	0.001	0.975
Currently not working	0.319	0.271	-0.040	0.092
Observations	1075	1075		

Source: Latin Barometer and authors' calculations. The independent mean comparison test is based on the calculation of the t-statistic, which considers the difference between the means and the samples' standard error.

Table 2: Effect of the Colombian elimination match on public opinion

Dependent Variable: Governance Index		
	(1)	(2)
<i>(Colombia * Post)</i>	-0.102 (0.000)***	-0.111 (0.000)***
<i>Colombia : Treatment</i>	0.081 (0.000)***	0.089 (0.000)***
<i>Post : After the event</i>	0.031 (0.047)*	0.0324 (0.029)*
Mean for Peru(<i>Pre</i>)	-0.704	-0.686
Individual Controls	No	Yes
Observations	1075	1075

Source: Latin Barometer and authors' calculations. The construction of both indices was structured around several questions aimed at reflecting respondents' perspectives on issues relating to the Government and the economy. The P-value of the ratio is shown between brackets. *, **, and *** indicate that the ratios are significant at 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01, respectively

Table 3: Heterogeneous effect of the exogenous shock on the opinion indicator on the Government

Dependent Variable: Governance Index				
	Male (1)	Female (2)	Higher Edu. (3)	No Higher Edu. (4)
<i>(Colombia * Post)</i>	-0.101 (0.007)***	-0.145 (0.000)***	-0.052 (0.187)	-0.157 (0.000)***
<i>Colombia : Treatment</i>	0.066 (0.000)***	0.110 (0.000)***	0.063 (0.022)*	0.112 (0.000)***
<i>Post : After the event</i>	-0.003 (0.866)	0.067 (0.002)**	0.051 (0.031)*	0.0302 (0.151)
Mean for Peru(<i>Pre</i>)	-0.626	-0.744	-0.781	-0.771
Individual Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	542	533	399	676

Source: Latin Barometer and authors' calculations. The construction of both indices was structured around several questions aimed at reflecting respondents' perspectives on issues relating to the Government and the economy. The P-value of the ratio is shown between brackets. *, **, and *** indicate that the ratios are significant at 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01, respectively

A Appendix Figures

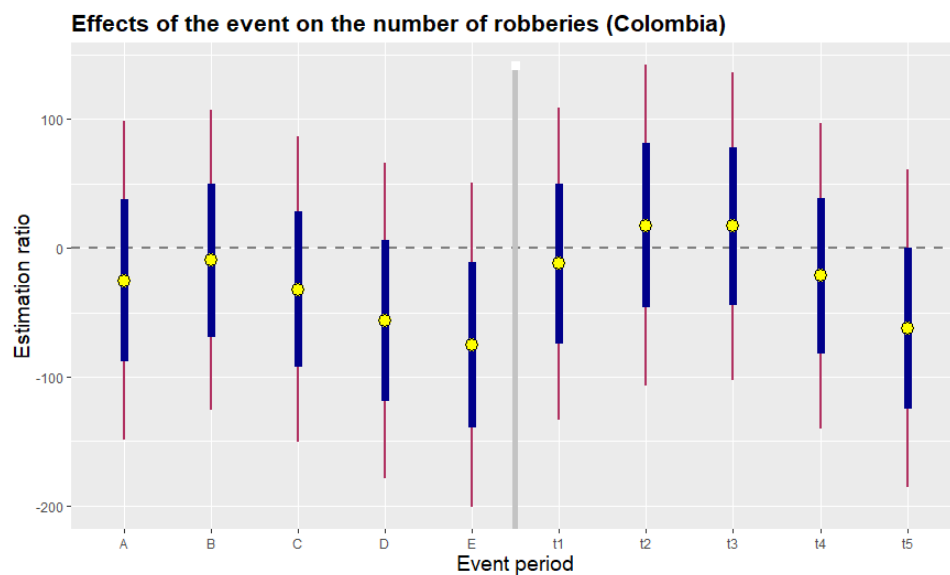


Figure A.1: Source: Latinbarómetro and author's calculations.

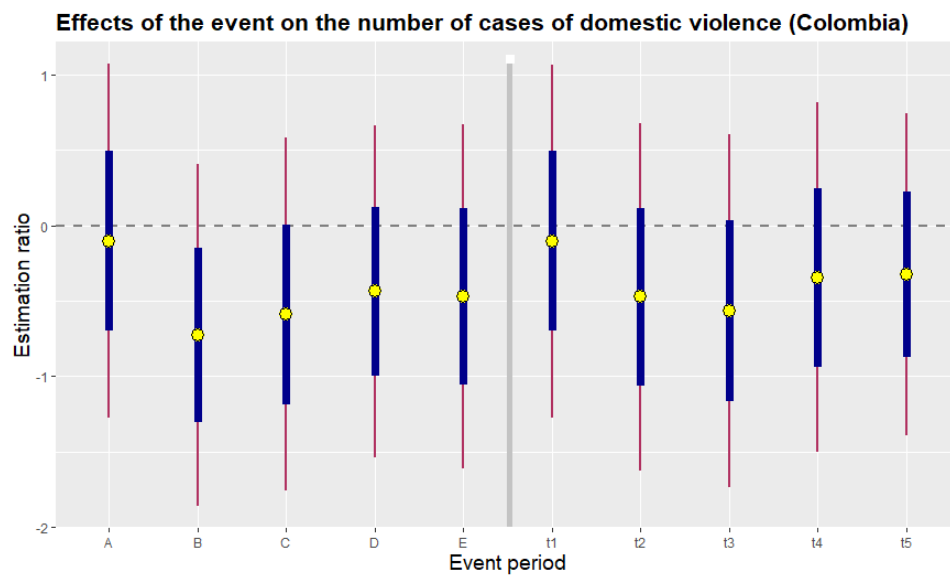


Figure A.2: Source: Latinbarómetro and author's calculations.