



Immovable Object: Americans' Sticky Views of Other Countries

By Benjamin N. Gedan and Emma Sarfity

There is ample public opinion research in the United States on a range of topics, but scant data on how Americans regard other countries. Though pollsters, including Gallup, Pew and even the U.S. government, regularly measure how foreign populations see the United States, there are no consistent or comprehensive surveys exploring the opposite question: how does the U.S. public regard foreign countries, and how do those views evolve following major political and economic developments abroad? Pollsters that do address the topic, such as Gallup, only include a narrow set of countries in their surveys, such as Russia and China.¹ In part, this likely reflects skepticism among pollsters about the interest, depth of knowledge and elasticity of U.S. public opinion about other countries. In other words, why ask Americans their perspectives on the world if their opinions are superficial, based mostly on stereotypes and cultural shorthand and unlikely to vary over time?

However, for governments attempting image makeovers designed to attract tourism, foreign investment and aid, understanding public opinion in the United States is crucial. These national marketing campaigns, after all, often absorb large sums of public money and attention from senior leaders. This paper examines the embeddedness of U.S. public opinion toward other countries using Argentina as a case study. Specifically, it attempts to determine

¹ Younes, Mohamed, "China, Russia Images in U.S. Hit Historic Lows," Gallup, March 1, 2021.

whether views in the United States of Argentina have changed over the past 15 years. Argentina is an ideal case study for three reasons: (1) it is widely recognizable and has longtime links to the United States; (2) it has experienced recent and dramatic political and economic changes that might have been expected to reshape U.S. public opinion; and, (3) its last government launched a yearslong effort to change Argentina's international image, including through a transformation of its relations with the United States. The question this paper addresses is whether Argentina's transformations and its national marketing efforts meaningfully affected U.S. public opinion.

Since latitudinal survey data is nonexistent, this study relies upon Google Trends to detect changes in U.S. public opinion about Argentina. Google Trends is an imperfect but useful proxy for polls; changes in relative Google search frequency provide insights into how, and how often, Americans think about Argentina. Helpfully, Google search data is comprehensive, covering the billions of Google searches made each day in the United States. That dataset vastly exceeds the sample size of any survey, limiting representativeness challenges. The data show whether U.S. internet users are increasingly or decreasingly interested in Argentina, and whether those interests are stable (e.g., focused on tourism, soccer and tango) or demonstrate awareness of the country's political and economic dramas.

Our analysis shows that U.S. public opinion toward Argentina is remarkably sticky. The data, for example, indicate that by far the most popular Argentina-related Google searches pertain to soccer. (Argentina is among the top soccer countries in the world, having won the World Cup twice and made it to the finals five times.) Despite repeated political and economic upheavals over the past 15 years, and a determined marketing campaign, we found no marked, sustained changes in U.S. search patterns related to Argentina. That's not to say Americans are not paying attention; there are public opinion pulses in response to significant events in Argentina. However, these spikes are generally ephemeral, and search patterns quickly return to the baseline. The same is not true for some other metrics, such as U.S. tourism to Argentina. But the Google search data clearly demonstrate the difficulty of meaningfully changing a country's public image in the United States.

Public Opinion and Google Trends

Contemporary polling that measures U.S. public opinion on foreign countries is limited, and the polling that does exist tends to measure reactions to U.S. foreign policy. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, for example, has been polling Americans since 1974 on their



preferences for U.S. international engagement.² Similarly, the Pew Research Center regularly asks Americans their views on U.S. foreign policy, including questions on alliances.³ Polls that ask about foreign policy often find that many respondents are unfamiliar with the topics. These kinds of polls, though helpful in gauging the public appetite for trade, foreign aid and other international engagement, shed no light on the public's perceptions of specific countries.

Governments hoping to increase tourism, student travel, trade, investment and aid often commission market research and communications firms in the United States, and use creative measures to gauge the impact, such as social media monitoring. But the absence of independent and systematic polling across countries and over time makes it difficult to identify patterns in U.S. public opinion toward other countries. This is where online search data can provide a useful proxy. Google Trends, though hardly a perfect measure, has become a popular tool for social scientists. The appeal of Google Trends is the size of the dataset, covering more than 5.5 billion daily Google searches.⁴ Not only is the dataset vastly larger than any polling sample, it is also constantly updated, permitting researchers to identify trends in real time.⁵ Finally, the open-ended nature of online search data offers a revealing glimpse into public interests and preoccupations.

Google Trends is an increasingly popular research tool across disciplines, including for its predictive power. One recent study, for example, used Google Trends data to predict the spread of COVID-19 by observing the frequency of search queries on coronavirus symptoms, sanitizer, masks, vaccines and related terms.⁶ Other researchers have used Google search data to forecast diverse phenomena such as unemployment trends in Spain,⁷ travel trends in the Bahamas⁸ and the future price of cryptocurrencies.⁹ There is also evidence that online search terms about a foreign country are correlated with perceptions

² The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "Chicago Council Survey," 2020, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/lester-crown-center-us-foreign-policy/chicago-council-survey>.

³ Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/6-views-of-foreign-policy/>.

⁴ Jun, Yoo, and Choi, "Ten years of research change using Google Trends: From the perspective of big data utilizations and applications," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, May 2018, Vol. 130.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Prasanth, Sikakollu et al. "Forecasting spread of COVID-19 using Google Trends: A hybrid GWO-deep learning approach." *Chaos, solitons, and fractals* vol. 142 (2021): 110336. doi:10.1016/j.chaos.2020.110336.

⁷ González-Fernández and González-Velasco, "Can Google econometrics predict unemployment? Evidence from Spain," *Economics Letters* Vol. 170 (June 2018).

⁸ Cevik, Serhan, "Where Should We Go? Internet Searches and Tourist Arrivals," *IMF Working Papers*, January 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2020/01/31/Where-Should-We-Go-Internet-Searches-and-Tourist-Arrivals-48949>.

⁹ Bleher, Johannes and Dimpfl, Thomas, "Today I got a million, tomorrow, I don't know: On the predictability of cryptocurrencies by means of Google search volume," *International Review of Financial Analysis* vol. 63 (May 2019).

about that country.¹⁰ Ingenhoff, Segev and Chariatte compared survey data and Google searches related to Switzerland and found opinions about Switzerland matched language used in Google searches.¹¹

Admittedly, Google Trends has limitations, and it is not a substitute for scientific surveying. Unlike traditional polls, demographic information is not available through Google Trends, so it is impossible to distinguish the views of individuals based on characteristics such as age, education level or geography. Furthermore, access to the internet in the United States, though high, is not universal; about 87 percent of the population uses the internet regularly.¹² That means a portion of the U.S. population is not represented in the Google search dataset, raising the possibility of bias in the sample. Likewise, though Google is the dominant search engine in the United States, a search engine analysis would ideally also include data from users of competitors such as Yahoo!, Bing and Ask.com. There are also disadvantages in relying only on the search engine musings of internet users rather than a professionally designed questionnaire: search behavior is a narrow window into the public interest in a topic. Public opinion is also expressed in other venues and on other platforms, including on social media and in-person conversations. Finally, the search volume data Google Trends provides is not expressed in the raw number of searches for any given term, but rather the term's frequency relative to its most popular period. The absolute number of searches for any given term is unknown.

Due to a change in the Google Trends method for geographical assignment, searches prior to January 1, 2011 often appear higher relative to subsequent data, and are sometimes

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¹⁰ Ingenhoff, Diana, Segev, Elad and Chariatte, Jérôme, “New insights for public diplomacy: The country and its objectives mirrored between attitudes and information searches in a cross-national comparison,” *International Journal of Communication* vol. 14(2020).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Individuals using the Internet (% of population), *The World Bank Group*, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=US>.

more volatile.¹³ For that reason, in this study, any comparisons of search patterns over time distinguish pre-2011 data from post-2011 data. Nevertheless, for this research, Google Trends serves as a useful proxy for public opinion polling. Specifically, the data allow us to measure the changing relative frequency of search terms over time and in so doing, to understand whether public opinion shifts in response to political and economic stimuli abroad and marketing campaigns by foreign governments.

Topsy-turvy Argentina

Argentina offers a test case for measuring the elasticity of U.S. public opinion. It is widely recognizable by the American public due to its size, long relationship with the United States and successful cultural exports. The United States established diplomatic relations with Argentina in 1823, and over the past two centuries, the two countries have collaborated on issues ranging from human rights to nuclear non-proliferation.¹⁴ Seven U.S. presidents have visited Argentina, beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936 and including the last five U.S. leaders. Argentina is a frequent reference in U.S. popular culture; the 1996 film adaptation of the Broadway hit *Evita*, starring Madonna, popularized the song “Don’t cry for me Argentina,” a favorite of newspaper headline writers. Argentina is mentioned six times on *The West Wing*, with both Josiah and Abigail Bartlet visiting the South American country. It is also renown for producing soccer greats, including Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi. Argentina is the birthplace of tango, a Hollywood obsession and inspiration for the cliché, “it takes two to tango.”¹⁵ Pope Francis is Argentine. Argentine movies have earned seven Oscar nominations for best foreign language film, and won twice. It is the land of Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges and Quino, the creator of *Mafalda*. Whole Foods has started selling yerba mate.

Aside from its familiarity, Argentina is an ideal case study due to its dramatic political transitions and economic convulsions in recent years that might have been expected to affect U.S. public opinion about the country. Grappling with the effects of the devastating 2001 economic collapse, Argentines elected the Peronist Néstor Kirchner president in 2003. Part of Latin America’s leftist “pink tide,” Kirchner¹⁶ and his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who succeeded him in 2007, pursued a populist economic agenda, battled with

¹³ Stephan M. Funk and Daniela Rusowsky, “The importance of cultural knowledge and scale analyzing search data as a proxy for public interest toward the environment,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 23, 2014.

¹⁴ “U.S.-Argentina Relations,” U.S. Embassy in Argentina, *U.S. Department of State*, <https://ar.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/>.

¹⁵ McManus, Emily J., “The Tango in Translation: Intertextuality, Filmic Representation, and Performing Argentine Tango in the United States,” *Texas A&M University*, 2013.

¹⁶ Vanden and Prevost, *Politics of Latin America: A Power Game*.

U.S. bondholders and frequently clashed with the United States.¹⁷ The pair made common cause with anti-American leftists including the notorious former Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez.¹⁸

In 2015, Argentina's economic program and foreign policy changed rapidly and completely after the election of the center-right Mauricio Macri. Macri settled with U.S. bondholders, pursued market reforms and established a close relationship with President Barack Obama, who visited Buenos Aires in 2016 and danced the tango at a state dinner.¹⁹ The next year, Macri visited President Donald Trump in the Oval Office.²⁰ In 2019, Argentina once again overhauled its economic strategy and foreign policy, when Macri was defeated by Peronist Alberto Fernández and his running mate, Fernández de Kirchner, the former president. Fernández is more moderate than his vice president, but his election still cooled relations with the United States and signaled a return to traditional Peronist economic policies, including trade protectionism.

During this period, Argentina also endured a series of economic crises that drew global attention, including in the United States. The first occurred late in Fernández de Kirchner's second term, when a fall in commodity prices led to a large fiscal deficit, slow growth and rapidly rising inflation.²¹ Macri engineered Argentina's return to global capital markets, but he failed to address the inherited budget deficit. In 2018, a run on the peso pushed him into the arms of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which awarded Argentina the IMF's biggest-ever loan, \$57 billion.²² The crisis deepened in the run-up to the 2019 election, when investors panicked over Macri's expected defeat. Early in Fernández's term, Argentina defaulted for the ninth time in its history.

If U.S. public opinion about other countries is at all sensitive to political and economic developments, undoubtedly Argentina's trials and tribulations would have moved the needle. Moreover, the Macri administration made an explicit attempt to reshape Argentina's image. Early in his presidency, he pledged to pursue a "pragmatic, intelligent" relationship with the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Fact Sheet: United States-Argentina Relationship," The White House, March 23, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/23/fact-sheet-united-states---argentina-relationship-0>.

²⁰ Superville, Darlene and Colvin, Jill, "Trump, Argentine President Macri hold White House talks," *AP News*, April 27, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/8fddba2e15094f168fca37ab50af4df1>.

²¹ Congressional Research Service, "Argentina Votes for Change in 2015 Presidential Election," CRS Insight, November 23, 2015, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IN10378.pdf>.

²² Pérez, Santiago and Dube, Ryan, "Why Argentina Faces an Economic Crisis. Again.," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-argentina-faces-an-economic-crisis-again-11569422388>.

Surprisingly, neither Argentina’s sweeping political and economic transformations nor the Macri administration’s marketing campaign moved the needle of U.S. public opinion.

U.S. companies to invest in the Vaca Muerta unconventional oil and gas fields. The president even held his own “Mini Davos,” the Argentina Business and Investment Forum, in 2016, where he made the case for investing in Argentina to nearly 2,000 foreign investors.²⁶ Surely this charm campaign and marketing effort made a dent in views of Argentina in the United States.

United States.²³ He cooperated on counter-narcotics and anti-money laundering and revoked a fee imposed on U.S. travelers to Argentina.²⁴ He attended the World Economic Forum in Davos. During Obama’s visit to Buenos Aires, the two signed a range of agreements, including pledges to reduce barriers to trade, collaborate on public health and encourage the development of renewable energy projects.²⁵ Macri’s ministers regularly flew to the United States, including to Houston, where they pressed

U.S. Public Opinion of Argentina as Measured by Google Trends

Surprisingly, neither Argentina’s sweeping political and economic transformations nor the Macri administration’s marketing campaign moved the needle of U.S. public opinion. This study tested 65 search terms related to Argentina’s culture, geography, politics and economy. While several of the more specific terms, such as “Argentina Tri-Border Area” and “Argentina penguins,” were searched too infrequently to yield usable data, a clear trend emerged in the analysis. Google Trends data show that Americans are not unaware of Argentina; spikes in relative search volume materialize when Argentina appears in the headlines of U.S. newspapers. This attention is not sustained, however; searches quickly return to traditional patterns, even when the changes in Argentina’s domestic and foreign

²³ “Argentina President Macri seeks ‘pragmatic’ relationship with U.S.,” *Reuters*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/argentina-politics/update-1-argentina-president-macri-seeks-pragmatic-relationship-with-u-s-idUSL2N1560NW>.

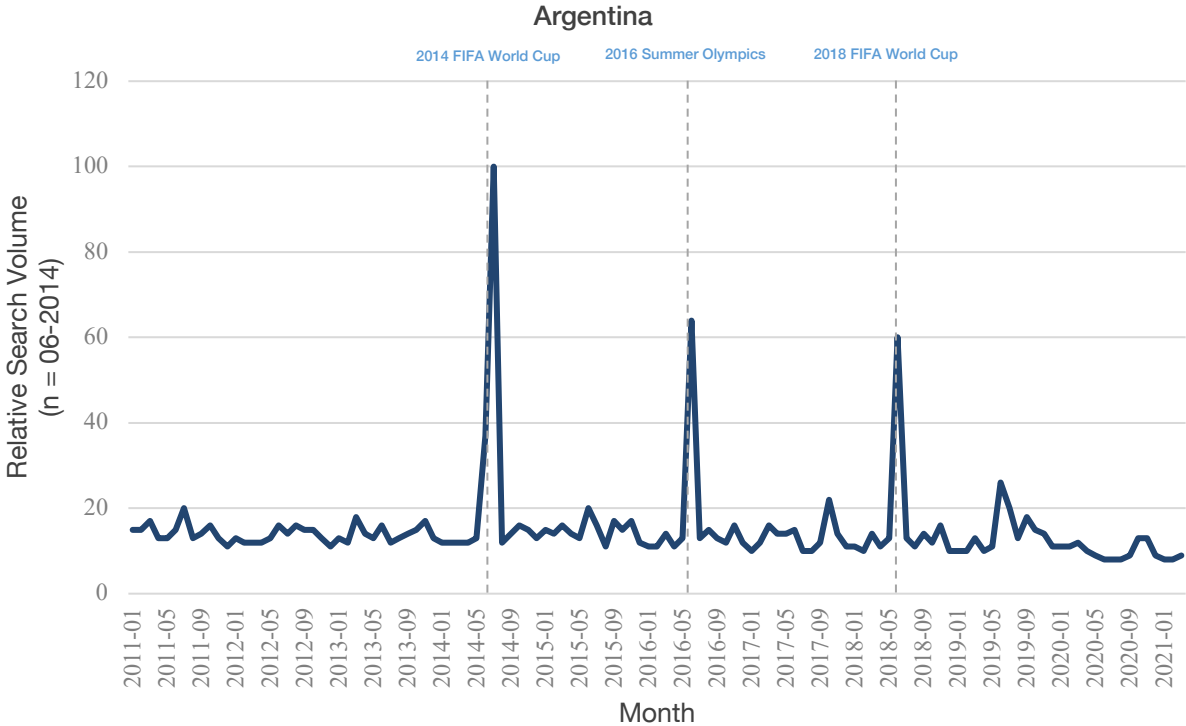
²⁴ Gilbert, Jonathan, “Obama Visit Affirms Argentina’s Shift Toward Center,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/world/americas/obama-visit-affirms-argentinas-shift-toward-center.html>.

²⁵ “The Other Trip: Obama in Argentina,” *The Inter-American Dialogue*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2016/03/the-other-trip-obama-in-argentina/>.

²⁶ Macri, Mauricio, “Los ojos del mundo están sobre la Argentina,” *Clarín*, September 10, 2016, https://www.clarin.com/economia/ojos-mundo-Argentina_0_Bk6oFhgh.html.

policy and its economic wellbeing are dramatic and durable. Searches for “Argentina” illustrate this phenomenon (see Figure 1). The labeled spikes in the graph show the months with the highest relative search volume, with the highest being in June 2014, during the World Cup. All other points on the graph are measured relative to that peak. The only periods that came close to that peak were in June 2016 and June 2018, during major soccer events. Aside from these moments, search volume remains relatively stable, showing a lack of sustained high-level interest.

Figure 1: Google Trends Data for Search Term “Argentina”

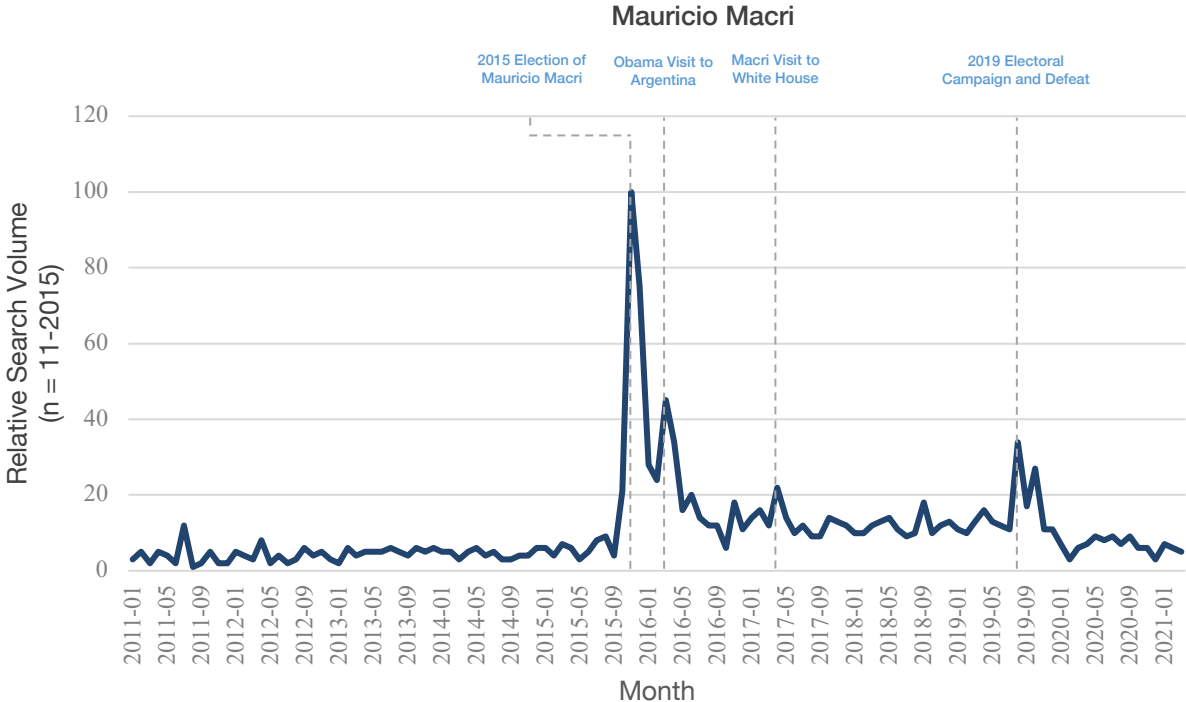


Source: Google Trends

A similar trend emerges for the search term “Mauricio Macri,” which surges at the expected times (see Figure 2). It peaks when Macri is elected and takes office, and pulses again with Obama’s visit to Buenos Aires in 2016; Macri’s visit to the White House in 2017; and Macri’s 2019 electoral defeat. But between these attention-grabbing moments, relative search volume for Argentina’s president remains quite low. That was despite Macri’s overhaul of Argentine foreign policy that brought Argentina closer to the United States than at any time since Carlos Menem’s presidency in the 1990s. Macri’s efforts won Argentina visits from a platoon of senior U.S. government officials and world leaders, and helped him land the 2018 G-20 summit. During his presidency, Theresa May becomes the first British prime minister

to travel to Buenos Aires and Xi Jinping made a state visit to Argentina. Nevertheless, Macri did not capture the public imagination in the United States. Google search data show only sporadic and fleeting attention from the American public to Argentina’s enthusiastically pro-American president.

Figure 2: Google Trends Data for Search Term “Mauricio Macri”

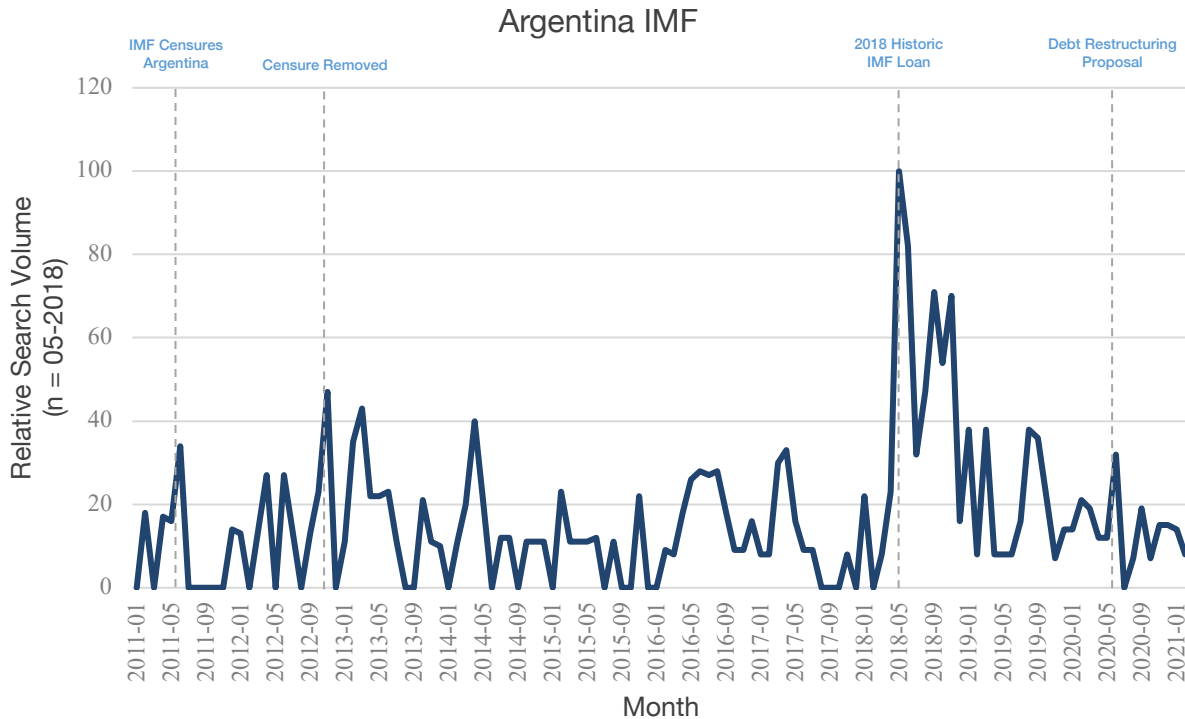


Source: Google Trends

Similarly, Americans episodically paid attention to Argentina’s tumultuous and high-stakes relationship with the IMF. As with searches for “Mauricio Macri,” relative search volume spiked for queries about Argentina and the IMF following major developments in the country’s relationship with the lender (see Figure 3). Americans, for example, were interested in the bad blood between Argentina’s government and the Fund during the Fernández de Kirchner presidency, when the IMF censured Argentina in 2013 for providing inaccurate economic data, the first time it had punished a member for that violation. Relative searches related to Argentina and the IMF also increased when the IMF granted Argentina the institution’s largest loan in history, \$57 billion, and again when Argentina stumbled toward its ninth sovereign default in 2020. However, the public’s interest was short-lived and following spikes, the relative search volume quickly and persistently reverted back to lower

levels. That was despite Argentina’s significant stumbles throughout the IMF program, including a full-blown currency crisis.

Figure 3: Google Trends Search Data for Search Term “Argentina IMF”

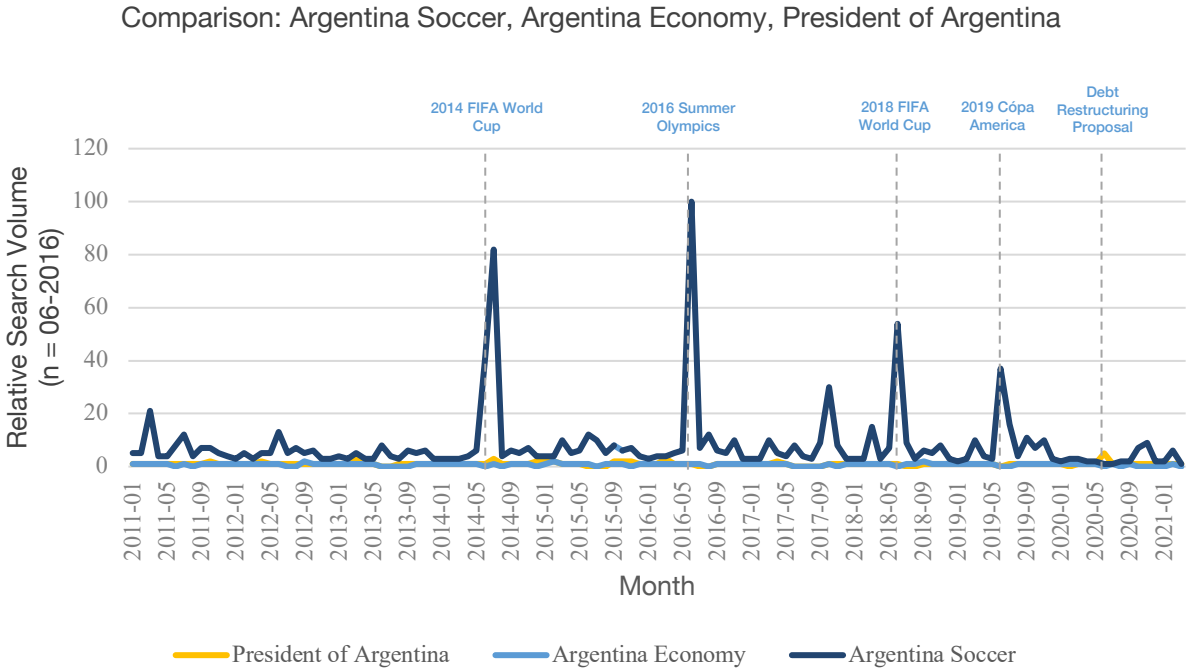


Source: Google Trends

These two examples suggest that U.S. public opinion of Argentina is generally stable, notwithstanding pulses of attention after major political and economic events. Indeed, for Americans, the biggest factors that drive interest in Argentina have nothing to do with the country’s economic fortunes or ideological makeovers. Rather, it is cultural developments in Argentina that consistently dominate Google searches about the country. For example, soccer is by far the most popular search term associated with Argentina. Predictably, there are spectacular spikes in relative search volume surrounding major soccer events, like the World Cup and the Olympics. But even in the absence of an important soccer match, internet searches for Argentina and soccer almost always overshadow any other subject related to the country (see Figure 4). For instance, when former President Néstor Kirchner died unexpectedly in October 2010, searches for “Argentina soccer” were still three times as common as “president of Argentina.” In fact, “president of Argentina” is a less popular search term than “Argentina soccer” even in the homestretch of the country’s hard-fought presidential elections.

The same is true when you compare interest in Argentina’s dramatic economic fluctuations to the attention paid in the United States to Argentina’s athletic achievements; “Argentina soccer” almost always trumps “Argentina economy.” During Argentina’s most recent default, for example, “Argentina soccer” was searched three times as often as “Argentina economy.” When Argentina was awarded the largest IMF loan in history, “Argentina soccer” was forty times more popular than “Argentina economy.” There are a few instances when this pattern did not hold. The first was in March 2004, as Argentina emerged from its 2001-2002 economic collapse and Kirchner was adopting unusually hardline tactics in negotiations with Argentina’s private bondholders and the IMF. Throughout that month, both “Argentina economy” and “president of Argentina” were searched more frequently than “Argentina soccer.” Search volume for “Argentina economy” was also higher than “Argentina soccer” in October and November of 2004. Yet neither term would outperform “Argentina soccer” for another 17 years, until June 2020, when “president of Argentina” was searched twice as often as “Argentina soccer” (see Figure 4). To earn that attention, President Alberto Fernández had implemented one of the world’s longest COVID-19 national lockdowns while simultaneously pushing Argentina’s creditors to restructure \$65 billion in debt. Even then, the pandemic’s interruption of sports better explains the relative increase in interest in Argentina’s leadership among Americans.

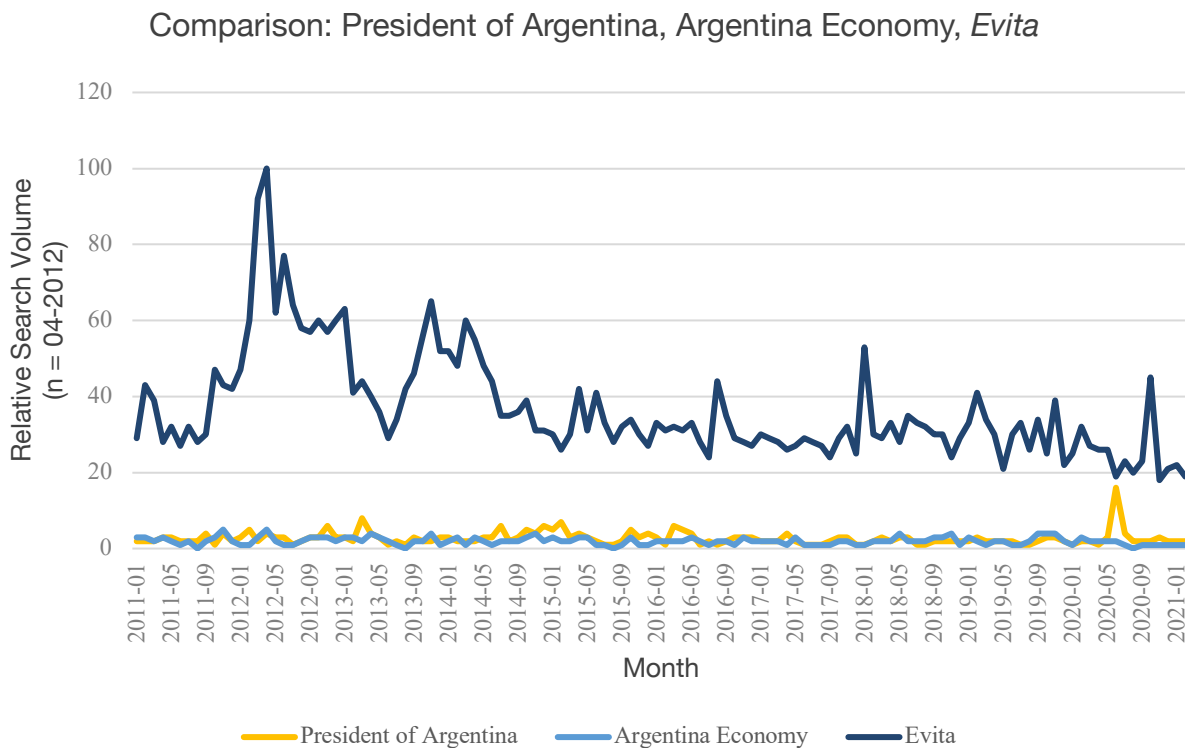
Figure 4: Google Trends Data Comparison for Terms “Argentina Soccer,” “Argentina Economy” and “President of Argentina”



Source: Google Trends

This trend does not indicate a particular fanaticism for soccer in the United States; the phenomenon holds true with other Argentine cultural indicators too. When comparing searches of “Argentina economy” or “president of Argentina” to “Evita,” for example, the difference is even starker (see Figure 5). There was not a single month in the past 17 years when U.S. interest in Argentina’s government or economy exceeded curiosity about Eva Perón, who died in 1952.

Figure 5: Google Trends Data Comparison for Terms “Evita,” “Argentina Economy” and “President of Argentina”



Source: Google Trends

The Google Trends data are revealing. Americans pay attention to major events in Argentina, as evidenced by surges in relevant search terms’ popularity. However, that interest is always fleeting. These pulses in public attention are correlated with Argentina’s appearance in newspaper headlines: the months with the most coverage of Argentina in major U.S. publications correspond to search volume spikes. For example, mentions of Argentina by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* were nearly three times higher in July 2014 than in July 2015.²⁷ This is mirrored in the search data: searches for “Argentina” were more

²⁷ According to Nexis data, Argentina appeared in *The New York Times* 166 times in July 2014 and 36 times in July 2015. Argentina appeared in 152 *Wall Street Journal* articles in July 2014 and 56 articles in July 2015.

Americans pay attention to major events in Argentina...[h]owever, that interest is always fleeting.

than six times higher in July 2014 than in July 2015.²⁸ A study by Elad Segev also recognizes this general trend, finding that searches for scientific terms appear to be partly driven by media attention.²⁹ As John Zaller has observed, the general public is often reliant on information from elites about public and foreign policy, and elite discourse helps drive public interest and shape public opinion.³⁰ Still, though public

interest may be temporarily captured by elite institutions, such as the news media, long-term public opinion does not appear to be easily moved. Despite spikes in search terms' relative popularity, the overall trendline for most terms is flat. Moreover, while pulses in search popularity show that Americans are aware of significant political and economic developments in Argentina, that interest, as measured by relative search volume, nearly always pales in comparison to attention paid to cultural symbols like soccer and Evita.

This phenomenon is corroborated by the “Related Searches” analytical feature on Google Trends, which shows the top searches related to a particular term. A simple query for the top searches related to the term “Argentina” is revealing: from 2011 to 2021, the top related search term by far was, “Argentina vs.,” indicating that interest in the results of sporting events, likely soccer matches, captures the most attention. This term is searched more than three times as often as the next most popular term, “Chile Argentina,” also presumably soccer-related.³¹ In fact, all but two of the top ten related terms are associated with soccer, the other two being variations on searches for the capital, Buenos Aires.

Voting with Their Feet

Though online search behavior in the United States did not change in response to the Macri administration's policy pivots and overtures to the United States, other proxies for U.S. public opinion showed initial movement. For example, since Macri's term began in late 2015, U.S. tourism to Argentina has increased annually. Though that change started slowly, growing by only 1.4 percent from 2016 to 2017, increases in U.S. tourism to Argentina

²⁸ Google Trends data, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=Argentina>.

²⁹ Segev, Elad and Baram-Tsabari, Ayelet, “Seeking science information online: Data mining Google to better understand the roles of the media and the education system,” *Public Understanding of Science* 21(7), 2012, p. 19.

³⁰ Zaller, John, *The nature and origins of mass opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1992, p.18.

³¹ The top results for a Google search for “Chile Argentina” are outcomes of the most recent Chile-Argentina soccer matches.

eventually outpaced global tourism growth, reaching 7.2 percent from 2017 to 2018.³² From 2018 to 2019, the growth of U.S. tourism to Argentina was nearly double that of the estimated average global change of 4 percent.³³

Other indicators, however, hardly budged at all, validating the Google Trends data as an indicator of the stability of U.S. public opinion toward Argentina. The number of U.S. students studying abroad in Argentina, for example, did not change significantly despite major changes in Argentina’s economy and leadership. From 2006 to 2019, the rate at which U.S. students studied in Argentina fluctuated, showing no sustained trends – up by as much as 14.5 percent in some years, while decreasing by nearly the same amount in others.³⁴ Despite Macri’s efforts to attract U.S. investment, levels of foreign direct investment (FDI) were not dramatically altered, and any slight gains made in the first years of the Macri presidency were reversed following the crash of the peso in 2018 (see Figure 6). Similarly, trade between Argentina and the United States varied from year to year, but there was no consistent increase under Macri’s pro-trade administration (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: U.S.-Argentine Trade and Investment, 2013-2019



Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC), U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)

³² “Argentina: Arrivals of non-resident tourists at national borders, by country of residence 2015-2019,” *World Tourism Organization*, <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.5555/unwtotfb0032011220152019202010>.

³³ U.N. World Tourism Organization, “International Tourism Growth Continues to Outpace the Global Economy,” January 20, 2020, <https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-growth-continues-to-outpace-the-economy>.

³⁴ Institute of International Education, “Open Doors Report,” 2020, <https://opendoorsdata.org>.

Colombia and Mexico

To determine whether U.S. public opinion is similarly inflexible in other cases, we tested various search terms related to Colombia and Mexico. If U.S. public opinion of Mexico and Colombia mirrored views of Argentina, we would expect to see stable search behavior. Like Argentina, Colombia and Mexico are relevant case studies, given the major changes both countries have undergone in recent years. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Colombia was battling violent drug cartels and guerrilla groups. But security, reflected in the number of homicides and kidnappings, improved dramatically between 2002 and 2017; levels of coca cultivation also declined precipitously between 2007 and 2013.³⁵ The government, with billions of dollars of U.S. assistance, dealt significant blows to Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a major factor leading to the signing of a peace agreement in 2016. In partnership with the United States, Colombian security forces began offering assistance throughout the region.³⁶ As a result of improved security, tourism to Colombia exploded, up 300 percent from 2006 to 2019.³⁷ Colombia's office of export promotion, Proexport Colombia, referenced the country's violent past in a gutsy 2008 slogan, "Colombia: The risk is that you'll want to stay."³⁸ Those improvements notwithstanding, since the signing of the peace accord, violence has surged in rural and border areas, as dissident former combatants, drug trafficking organizations and the still-active ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or National Liberation Army) guerrillas battle for control of illicit trafficking routes. Coca cultivation is at an all-time high,³⁹ and violence against environmental and indigenous activists remains stubbornly commonplace.⁴⁰

Mexico has experienced the opposite phenomenon. Though the United States and Mexico have been jointly fighting drug traffickers since at least 2006, Mexico's security situation has worsened considerably. As drug trafficking organizations battle for territory, Mexico has

³⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "DataUNODC," <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/Country-profile?country=Colombia>; see also, Pinzón, Juan Carlos, "Colombia Back from the Brink," *PRISM* 5, no. 4 (2007), https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_5-4/Columbia%20Back%20from%20the%20Brink.pdf.

³⁶ Pinzón, Juan Carlos.

³⁷ Rauls, Leonie, "How Tourism Can Jumpstart Colombia's Economy," *Americas Quarterly*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/how-tourism-can-jumpstart-colombias-economy/>.

³⁸ Modak, Sebastian, "How Colombia, Once Consumed by Violence, Became Your Next Destination," *Condé Nast Traveler*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/how-colombia-once-consumed-by-violence-became-your-next-destination>.

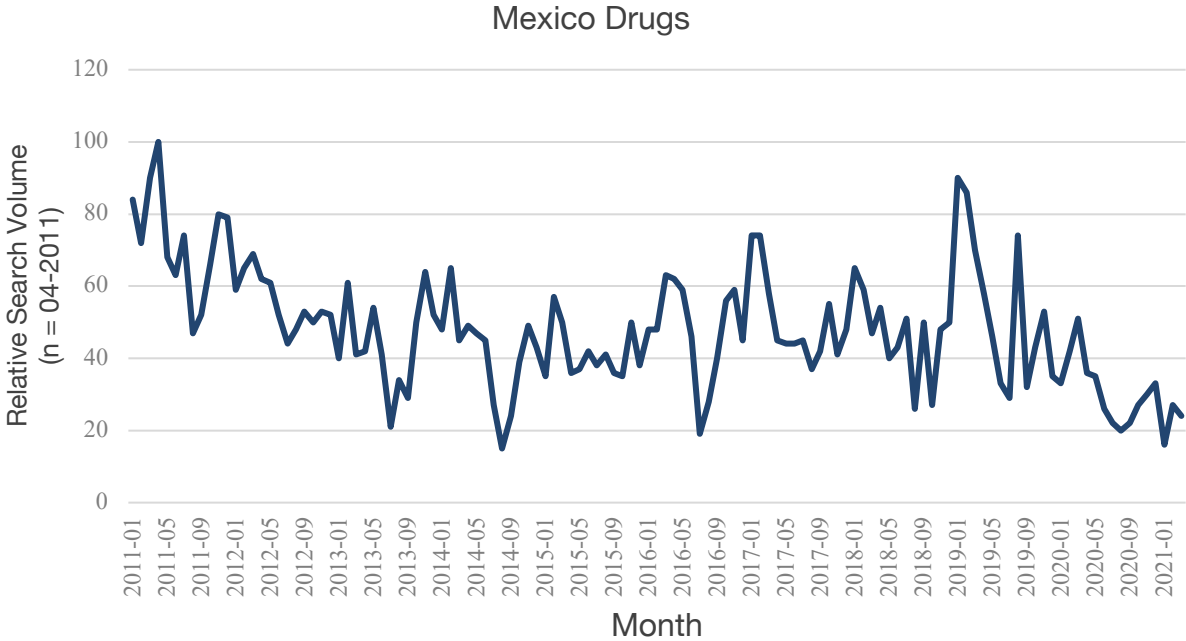
³⁹ U.S. Embassy in Colombia, "ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Production in the Andean Region," June 25, 2021, <https://co.usembassy.gov/ondcp-releases-data-on-coca-cultivation-and-production-in-the-andean-region/>.

⁴⁰ Rueda, Manuel, "UN registers steep rise in murders of Colombian activists," *AP News*, February 23, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/world-news-violence-colombia-united-nations-7313e9916ef2e88b28a71e00ee69eea9>.

suffered record homicide rates, especially in the states near the U.S. border.⁴¹ Amid the steady rise in violence, several high-profile incidents captured international attention, including the 2015 prison break and recapture of the notorious drug kingpin Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán⁴² and the 2019 massacre of an American Mormon family in Mexico.

As in the Argentina case, these striking turnarounds in Colombia and Mexico did not yield meaningful changes in U.S. public opinion as measured by Google Trends search data. In fact, searches for “Mexico drugs” and “Mexico violence” actually *decreased* (see Figure 8) despite a sustained increase in violence and drug trafficking in Mexico. Even for a neighboring country, in which U.S. guns arm criminals, U.S. tax dollars support the security services and U.S. nationals have been targeted, U.S. public opinion seems impervious to major overseas developments.

Figure 7: Google Trends Data for Term “Mexico Drugs”

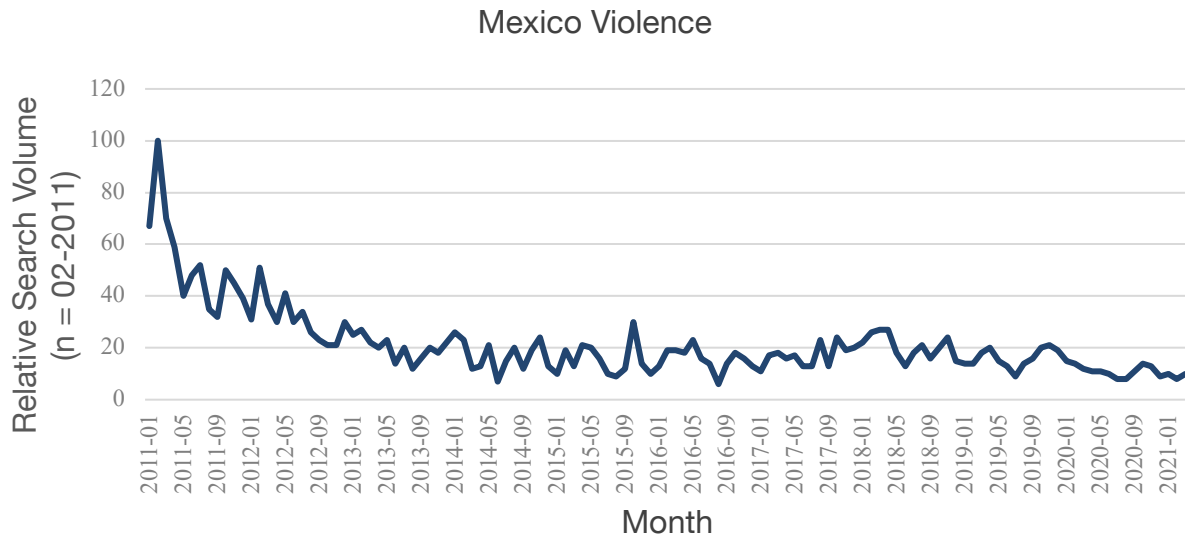


Source: Google Trends

⁴¹ “Mexico’s homicide rate stayed high in 2020 despite pandemic,” *AP News*, January 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/homicide-coronavirus-pandemic-latin-america-mexico-a90c2a172f39ab2546de465c73a60543>.

⁴² Ahmed, Azam, “How El Chapo Was Finally Captured, Again,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/world/americas/mexico-el-chapo-sinaloa-sean-penn.html>.

Figure 8: Google Trends Data for Search Term “Mexico Violence”



Source: Google Trends

Similar to Argentina trends, searches for “Mexico soccer” and “Mexico flights” are always more popular than “Mexico drugs” or “Mexico violence” (see Figure 9). Despite headline-grabbing events and sustained increases in violence and drug trafficking, the U.S. public is focused mostly on cultural phenomena and travel.

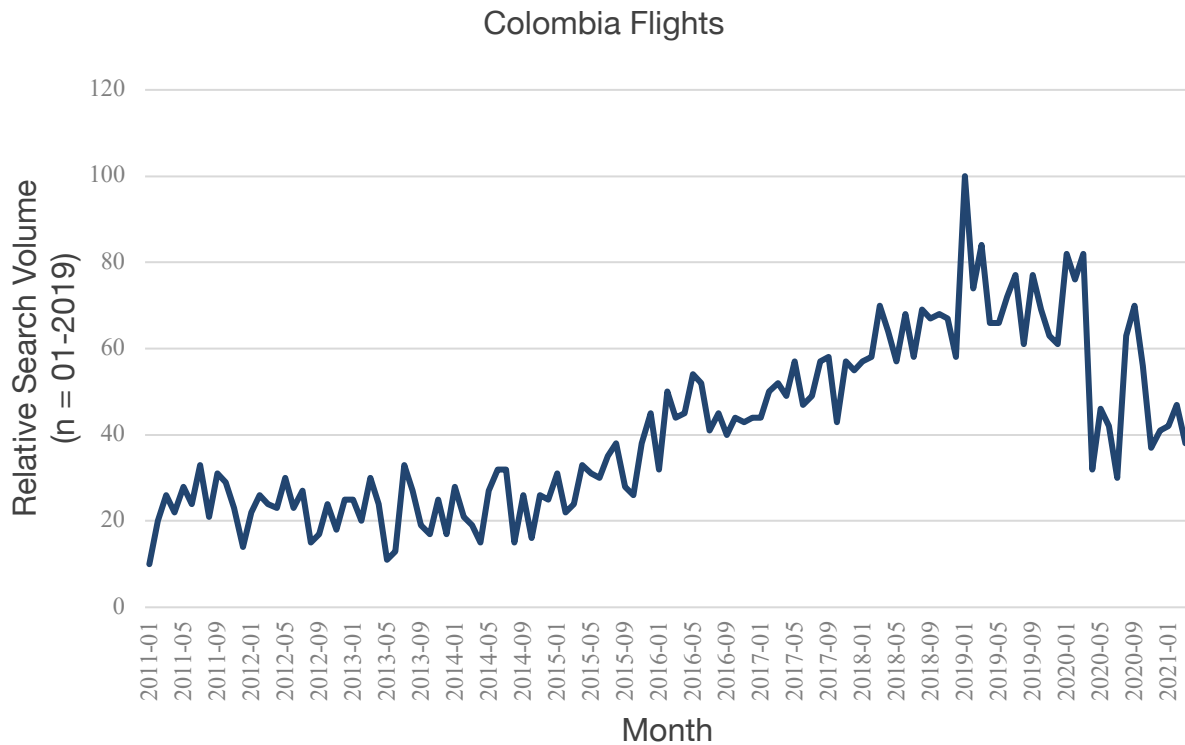
Figure 9: Google Trends Data for Search Terms “Mexico Soccer,” “Mexico Flights,” “Mexico Drugs” and “Mexico Violence”



Source: Google Trends

The Colombia case also shows the difficulty of escaping historic perceptions. Consistent with Colombia’s increase in tourism, search data does show sustained interest in flying to Colombia (see Figure 10).

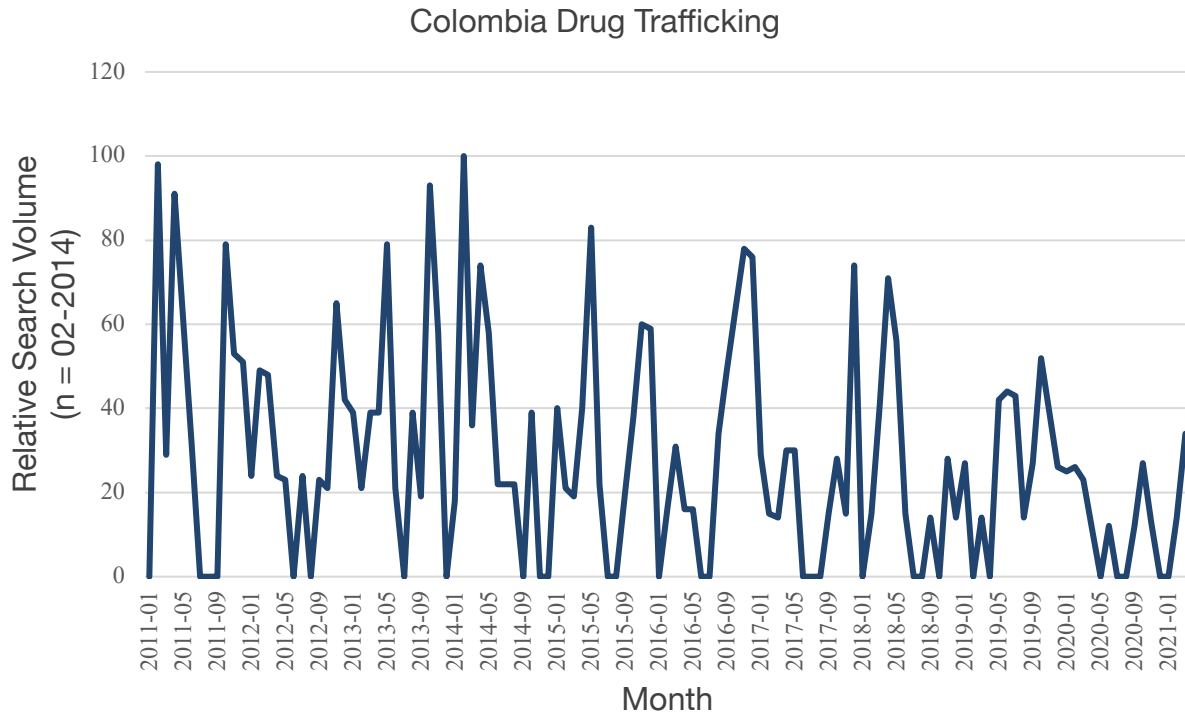
Figure 10: Google Trends Data for Search Term “Colombia Flights”



Source: Google Trends

At the same time, however, searches related to Colombia’s past conflicts, such as “Colombia drug trafficking,” have not receded in the way the Colombian tourism board might have hoped (see Figure 11). Despite a significant decrease in violence in the country that receives the most U.S. foreign assistance in the hemisphere, and where the last president won the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiations with rebels, there has been no meaningful decline in searches related to Colombia’s violent history.

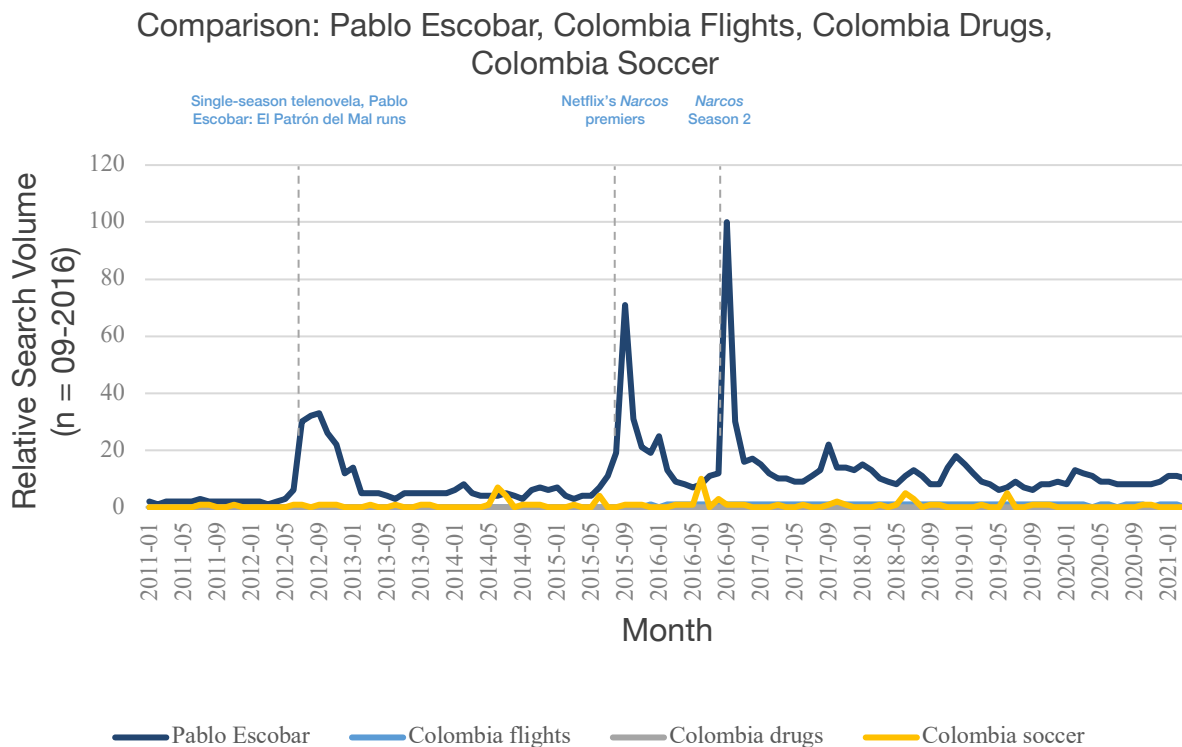
Figure 11: Google Trends Data for Search Term “Colombia Drug Trafficking”



Source: Google Trends

As in the other two cases, cultural phenomena like soccer dominate searches for Colombia. Searches for “Colombia soccer” almost always outpace those of any other subject. Similarly, interest in Pablo Escobar, the notorious Colombian drug lord, has not diminished. Searches for Escobar, a Hollywood staple, have long exceeded searches for “Colombia flights,” “Colombia drugs” and even “Colombia soccer” (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Google Trends Data for Search Terms “Pablo Escobar,” “Colombia Flights,” “Colombia Drugs” and “Colombia Soccer”

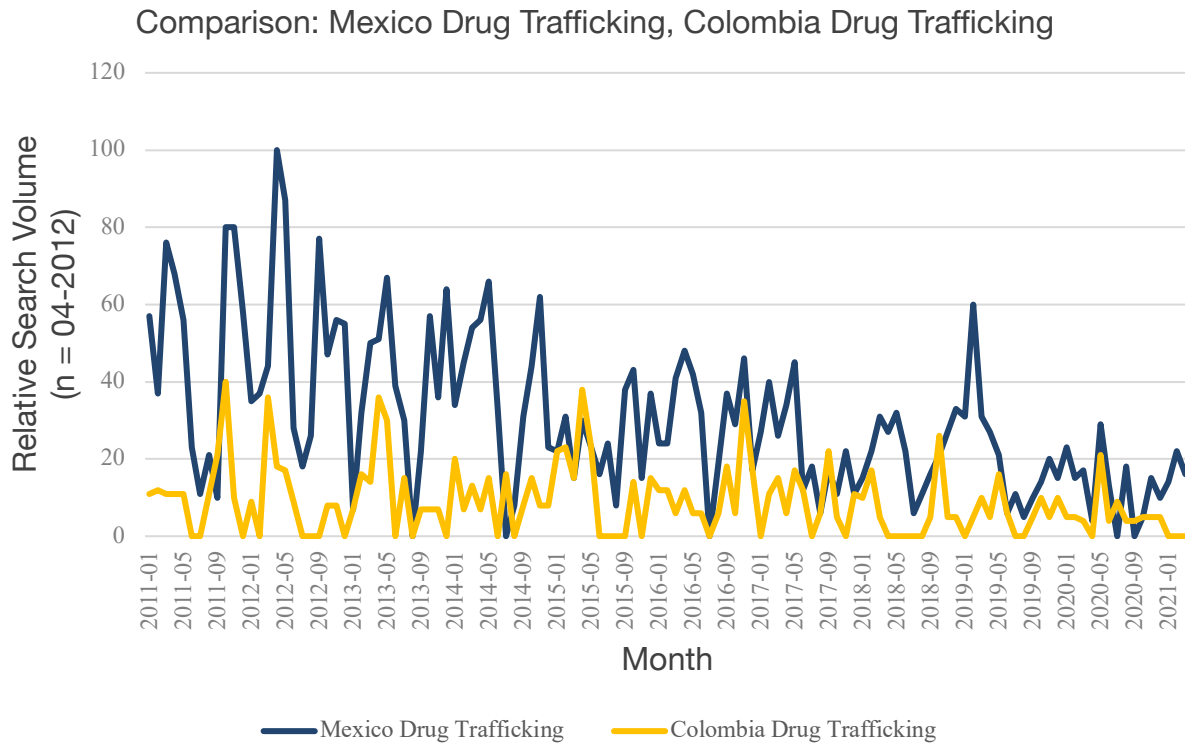


Source: Google Trends

Even prior to the 2015 release of Netflix’s *Narcos*, dramatizing the life of Escobar, searches for the kingpin almost always outstripped any of the other terms. During major sporting events such as the 2014 World Cup, “Colombia soccer” has briefly overtaken “Pablo Escobar” in popularity. But Hollywood keeps Colombia’s dark side in the spotlight. Depictions of Colombian narco-trafficking in *Miami Vice*, *Clear and Present Danger* and *Crocodile Dundee II* do not let Americans forget about Colombia’s struggles with drug trafficking.

The fixedness of U.S. public opinion of Mexico and Colombia is best illustrated by a comparison of relative search volume for “Mexico drug trafficking” and “Colombia drug trafficking” (see Figure 13). Despite Mexico’s explosion of drug-related violence, relative searches for “Mexico drug trafficking” have actually declined since 2011, demonstrating general unawareness of Mexico’s deteriorating security landscape. Though Colombia’s security situation improved markedly until recently, searches for “Colombia drug trafficking” have remained relatively stable, at some moments even overtaking searches for “Mexico drug trafficking.”

Figure 13: Google Trends Data for Search Terms “Mexico Drug Trafficking” and “Colombia Drug Trafficking”



Source: Google Trends

Conclusion

Google Trends data serves as an imperfect but useful proxy for U.S. public opinion regarding other countries. This research showed that Americans pay attention to key events in foreign countries. For example, relative search volume for Argentina’s Mauricio Macri spiked around his 2015 election and again at the time of his 2019 electoral defeat. Search data exhibited similar spikes for the term “Argentina IMF” at predictable moments, such as the Fund’s historic loan agreement with Argentina in 2018. However, Google Trends data show this interest was ephemeral. Internet search patterns quickly reverted to lower levels and traditional subjects, demonstrating the stickiness of public opinion about other countries.

Americans’ interest in the political and economic affairs of other countries is not only fleeting, but also pales in comparison to the attention paid to cultural phenomena. Searches for “Argentina soccer,” for example, are more popular than for “president of Argentina” even during elections. Similarly, there was not a single period in the past 17 years when searches

for Argentina’s economy or government were more popular than searches for Evita. The same is true for Mexico and Colombia; Americans almost always search for soccer more often than information about either country’s dramatically changing security landscape.

Over all, Google Trends data show that opinions about other countries are sticky. Except for in the case of “intermestic” issues, in which foreign policy and domestic policy are interlinked, U.S. public opinion is generally rigid. For example, while Trump’s fondness for Russia led to a striking reversal in Republican attitudes toward the country,⁴³ that type of change is rare. In the case of Argentina, neither striking shifts in economic and foreign policy, nor a public relations campaign by the Macri administration, led to a sustained change in U.S. public opinion toward Argentina. Likewise, despite Colombia’s significant progress over many years in combatting organized crime and violence, searches for Pablo Escobar and drug trafficking remain as popular as ever. These patterns are evident in other metrics as well. In Argentina, U.S. foreign direct investment, trade and study abroad trends also show little sensitivity to political and economic changes, or even political and economic stability.

This observation is relevant to foreign leaders determined to remake their country’s image through policy overhauls and public relations campaigns. It turns out that American public opinion is not easily moved. Indeed, even for a neighboring country, Americans pay fleeting attention to newspaper headlines, but sustained and significant changes in a country do not produce commensurate changes in public perceptions.

⁴³ Reinhart, RJ, “Republicans More Positive on U.S. Relations With Russia,” *Gallup*, July 13, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/237137/republicans-positive-relations-russia.aspx>.





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