

# **A New Electoral Order—And A New Role For Election Polling**

*By Ulises Beltrán Ugarte*

The national elections held on August 21 saw major changes across the entire electoral system in Mexico. The government's role in it was sharply reduced. Campaign finance limits were imposed for the first time. Also for the first time, a nationally televised debate took place, involving the three major party candidates. To discourage ballot fraud, voter picture-identification was introduced, along with a new census of voters and steps to insure the privacy of the voting act. United Nations personnel trained local, non-governmental organizations to observe the balloting and, for the first time in Mexican history, international observers were allowed to observe the balloting. President Salinas pledged to conduct a clean and "transparent" election, and I believe the steps that he introduced went far to attaining this goal.

The electorate responded to these reforms. Over 75% of registered voters cast their ballots (and 95% of all voting-age Mexican citizens were registered). This turnout was far higher than that in any previous Mexican election. It's far higher, of course, than turnout in US presidential contests.

Perhaps most interesting to readers of *Public Perspective* is the important role that public opinion surveys played in Mexican election reform. Right after 10 pm on election day, the Mexican people learned the outcome—that Ernesto Zedillo, the candidate of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) had won with 50% of the popular vote over Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, the candidate of the PAN (Partido Accion Nacional), who came in second with 27% of the vote, and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the PRD (Partido de la Revolucion Democratica) candidate, who

finished third with 17%. For the first time in a Mexican presidential election, the results didn't come from a government office or a political party, but from an organization of the private communications media. The information was obtained from an exit poll conducted by a polling consortium comprising: Mitofsky International, Indemerc-Louis Harris, and Buré de Investigación de Mercados. Immediately thereafter, the media reported the results of a number of "quick count" tallies of the vote from selected voting stations around

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the country—tallied by different non-governmental organizations. Around 2:30 the next morning, the general electoral council broadcast the results of its own quick count. The results were almost identical to the full vote count which was completed days later.

The use of survey research and quick counts (the latter known in the United States as key precinct analysis) resolved one of

the most serious problems in recent Mexican electoral experience—the inability to get the election outcome known in a timely fashion, resulting in the suspicion that the government was using the time to alter the results. This had been a critical issue in the 1988 presidential election, leading to a challenge of the results. This year, not only did the results get out quickly but, as noted, organizations independent of the government played the leading role in many of the early estimates.

## **Pre-Election Surveys Also Came of Age**

The 1994 campaign saw a big increase in pre-election polling and, with a few exceptions, some notable advances in the methodology of these polls. For the most part, the pre-election polls presented reliable data on how the race was going, and their findings anticipated the actual results.

The Mexican polling industry had to go through difficult times, however, before gaining a measure of credibility. Based on past experience, much of the public was very skeptical about poll findings—inclined to see them as, in effect, something designed to serve the purpose of whatever party or interest was behind them. The Mexican media, too, needed an education in how to judge polls. The tendency still evident during much of the campaign was to publish whatever findings there were uncritically—that is, without giving readers any guidance on how different types of samples and other variations in methodology could lead to very different results. Instead, when two polls reached sharply different outcomes, the media's inclination was often to dismiss all polling efforts as inherently unreliable in the Mexican environment.

**Table 1**  
**Most Polls Showed a Clear PRI Advantage**  
 (And the exit polls were right on the money)

<b>How the election actually came out: Final Vote Tally</b>	<b>PRI</b> 50%	<b>PAN</b> 27%	<b>PRD</b> 17%	<b>Others</b> 6%
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**What the Late Polls Showed:**

**Vote Preferences**

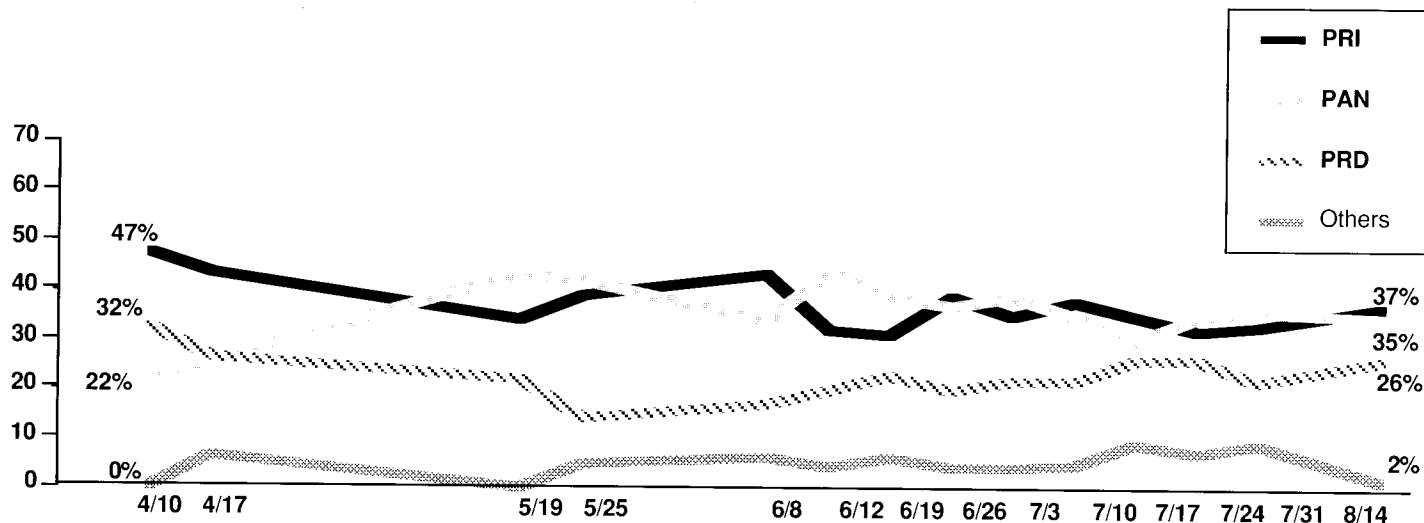
<b>Last Day of Survey</b>	<b>Polling Organization</b>	<b>Sponsor</b>				
7/28/94	Covarrubias and Assoc.	<i>Voz y Voto</i>	63	23	11	4*
7/29/94	Reforma newspaper	Reforma newspaper	61	24	12	3*
8/03/94	Belden & Russonello and Ciencia Aplicada, S.A.	Foreign Banks	56	23	11	10*
8/03/94	Technomanagement	Texan entrepreneurs	43	29	20	8*
8/06/94	Centro de Estudios de Opinión	University of Guadalajara	47	33	16	4*
8/07/94	Gabinete de Estudios de Opinión	<i>Etcétera</i>	46	30	15	9*
8/07/94	Indemerc-Louis Harris	Chamber of Radio and TV Broadcasting	55	27	15	4*

**What the Exit Polls Showed:**

		<b>PRI</b>	<b>PAN</b>	<b>PRD</b>	<b>Others</b>
Mitofsky International, Indemerc-Louis Harris, and Buré de Investigación de Mercados (BIMSA)	Chamber of Radio and TV Broadcasting	50%	27%	16%	7%
Gabinete de Estudios de Opinión	<i>Etcétera</i>	49	29	17	5

Note: \*The distributions shown in all of these pre-election polls add to 100. In the case of the surveys by Louis Harris and by Beldon & Russonello, the assignment of non-responses (don't know and others) was made by the survey organization itself, based on its own assignment methods. In the other instances, non-response has simply been "calculated out." That is, it has been assigned in proportion to the declared preference of the rest of the sample. The author doesn't consider this the best method, but it was the only one available to him. A poll done July 25-August 1 by MORI isn't included here, even though it is a true national survey. The reason for exclusion is that the survey organization qualified its findings in a way significantly different from the release of the other polls' data. This MORI poll is discussed at length in the text.

**Figure 1**  
**The Weekly MORI Polls Showed the Race Close**



Source: These surveys were conducted by MORI for the magazine, *Este Pais*. Interviews for these surveys were in-the-street intercepts in the five largest Mexican cities.

**The MORI-Mexico Polls**

The British survey research firm, Market & Opinion Research International (MORI), has a Mexican affiliate. The latter's work contributed to the heightened controversy which swirled around opinion research during this past campaign. MORI's polls were typically based on samples of only 315 to 320 cases, with the interviews conducted in the street, in just five cities, without employing a probability sampling design. The results of such polls are likely, of course, to vary wildly with the actual preferences of the national electorate. Yet, throughout the campaign MORI data were featured prominently in both the Mexican and US press. Its weekly polls, published in the magazine *Este Pais*, showed the contest close from April through July, with the PRI and the PAN candidates alternating as leaders, and with the PRD nominee behind, but closing. The last of these weekly surveys in late July showed a very close three-way contest in which any one of the major contenders might win.

In fact, however, whenever a random national sample was employed, the polls using it showed the race very differently. These surveys always saw the PRI well ahead, followed by the PAN in second place, and the PRD well back. Table 1

reports the results of these pre-election surveys taken in August, and of the two properly-designed exit polls done on election day. Figure 1 shows, in comparison, the findings of the weekly MORI surveys for *Este Pais* from April through mid-August.

As to its weekly surveys, MORI insisted that its approach was sounder than that of pollsters using standard sampling methods. It argued that conventional polling in Mexico was flawed because there were no conditions for a free and fearless expression of individual preferences—a result either of cultural traits, or the fear that those siding with the opposition would be punished. MORI maintained that only anonymous, in-the-street interviews gave respondents a chance to escape this fear of expressing their true feelings.

How to allocate the "don't know" or "no answer" respondents was another major topic in dispute. Most pollsters looked to "don't know" responses as indicating genuine indecision. MORI, in contrast, read them as involving concealed choice. Most pollsters attempted to estimate the undecideds' leanings either by a proportional redistribution of preferences among all parties, assuming no change in the general trend, or by identifying the socio-attitudinal profile of the undecideds and allo-

ating them in a way matching the stated preferences of similar groups. MORI, in contrast, distributed the undecideds only among the opposition parties, which obviously led it to see a much more competitive race.

Furthermore, MORI assumed that some respondents were lying when they expressed preference for the PRI, and that polls showing a big PRI advantage only revealed a lack of touch with Mexican reality, if not the outright manipulation of polls by the government. Under such assumptions, MORI conducted weekly, non-probability, in-the-street polls in order to overcome the alleged problem of unfaithful respondents.

From July 25 through August 1, however, MORI departed from the methods of its weekly surveys and did a national poll with roughly half the interviews conducted in the street, but another half in the home, following some form of probability sampling. This survey showed the PRI candidate well ahead, with the PRD nominee way back in third place.

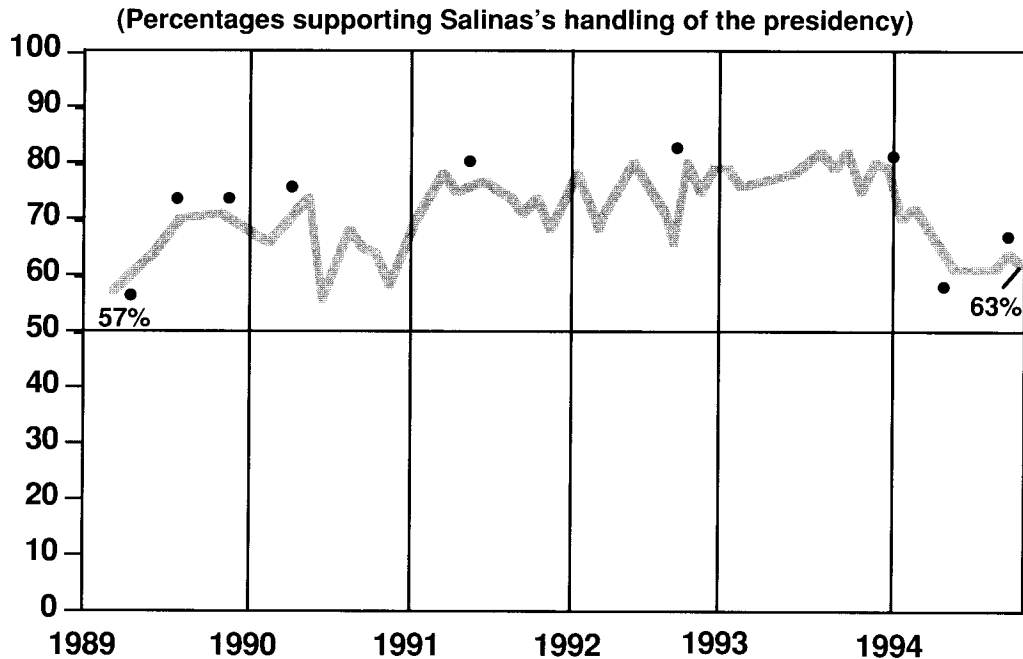
In releasing this national survey, though, MORI disputed its own findings. It argued that the results shown in the data would apply only if the turnout were low, on the order of 40% of the eligible elector-

**Table 2**  
**How Mexicans Voted:**

		PRI	PAN	PRD	Others	Percent of Sample*
<b>By Gender</b>						
Male		49%	29%	17%	5%	53%
Female		53	27	14	6	47
<b>By Age</b>						
18-23 years old		48	32	13	7	20
24-29 years old		49	30	16	5	19
30-44 years old		52	26	17	5	35
45-59 years old		53	25	16	6	17
60 years and older		55	25	16	4	9
<b>By Education</b>						
None		64	18	12	6	12
Primary school		58	23	15	4	36
Secondary school		49	30	15	6	19
Preparatory school		40	36	18	6	17
University or more		41	36	18	5	16
<b>By Income</b>						
N\$0-1,374 (below poverty level)		54	25	16	5	64
N\$1,375-2,291 (low income)		45	33	15	7	16
N\$2,292-4,581 (lower middle income)		45	34	16	5	12
N\$4,582-13,743 (upper middle income)		49	33	14	4	6
N\$13,744 or more (wealthy)		45	44	7	4	2
<b>By their 1988 presidential vote</b>						
Manuel J. Clouthier		15	73	7	5	12
Carlos Salinas		75	16	6	3	51
Cuauhtemoc Cardenas		9	20	64	7	13
Rosario Ibarra De Piedra		41	37	16	6	20
<b>By when they made up their mind</b>						
Always vote for the same party		65	19	12	4	51
Since I knew who the candidates were		40	32	21	7	13
During the candidate's campaigning,						
before the debate		36	35	19	10	14
Since the televised debate		29	50	15	6	13
In the last few days		39	28	23	10	9
<b>By view of Salinas's record</b>						
"In general, do you agree	Agree	67	20	8	5	63
or disagree with the way	To some extent	34	42	17	7	18
President Salinas has	Disagree	14	40	39	7	19
governed the country?"						
<b>By view of the country's economic situation</b>						
"Do you think that the	Improved	68	21	7	4	53
economic situation has	Remained the same	42	34	18	6	26
improved or deteriorated	Deteriorated	20	39	34	7	21
since President Salinas						
took office?"						

The data in the right-hand column are the percent of the sample belonging to each group shown. For example, 53% of this sample were male, 47% female.  
**Source:** Exit poll taken by Mitofsky International, Indemere-Louis Harris, and Buré de Investigación de Mercados (BIMSA), August 21, 1994.

**Figure 2**  
**Backdrop: Consistently High Marks for Salinas**



**Note:** These data are from surveys taken under the direction of Ulises Beltrán and the Mexican president's office. Some of the data points are from surveys taken in six Mexican cities only; while the others, indicated by the (•), are from national samples.

ate. Based on its analysis, MORI maintained that the vote against the PRI would rise sharply as turnout rose. With a turnout in the 55-60% range, according to the MORI projections, the PAN would win; and with a turnout in the 70-75% range, the PRD—though shown only in the teens in the raw survey data—actually might win a narrow victory. In fact, turnout did exceed 75%—and still the PRI won handily and the PRD was way back in third place.

### Getting It Right

It's unfortunate that all this wrangling over the polls took place because, as I have said, on the whole the polls did a creditable job. The closest forecasts were by Gabinete de Estudios de Opinión, sponsored by *Etcétera* magazine, and by Indemerc-Louis Harris, whose surveys were sponsored by the Chamber of Radio and TV Broadcasting. The electoral results showed that, in general, the Mexican public had answered

truthfully when asked about its electoral preferences. There's no longer a case for not following the basic rules of probability sampling. The results also disprove the notion that nonvoting reflects hidden opposition to the government, and that higher turnout would inherently result in lower PRI support. In the current environment, at least, this just is not true.

Given the willingness of the Mexican public to participate in surveys and state their actual views, it's not surprising that the exit polls very closely approximated the actual vote results. It's a bit ironic that, at a time when exit polling is encountering some problems in the US in terms of respondents' willingness to participate, exit polling seems entirely feasible in Mexico.

Mexico made strides in 1994 in terms of the quality of its election-related opinion research. Still, survey research in the country must overcome barriers to becoming

fully credible. The mass media gave considerable play to the survey findings, but were reluctant to make sharp distinctions between which survey data could be trusted and which could not. There still isn't in place an adequate interpretive climate, in which data collected through unreliable methods are discounted. This continuing problem is in part a consequence of the marginal place survey research has had in the academic community, where its credibility is only now being built. Until the academic-based "policing" function is firmly established, it's unlikely that the mass media will handle survey results in a more accurate and systematic way.

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*Ulises Beltrán is technical adviser to the president of Mexico*