Opinion polling has come to be one of the most important and visible manifestations of democratic and free-market societies. It is therefore only natural to expect that countries developing in these political and economic directions will want to adopt and adapt polling to their own situations. However, public opinion researchers in emerging democracies face challenges that are in many ways far more severe than those faced by the pioneers of American polling back in the 1930s. The case of Argentina illustrates this point.

Polling is breaking out all over this Latin American nation. Surveys appear nearly every day in one or another of the country’s major newspapers. There are two reasons for this, one political, one economic. Politically, the country has joined the democratic side of the table. In May 1995, it underwent its third democratic election since the last military government left office in the early 1980s. Economically, the country has gone through a traumatic period of rapid adjustment to lowered trade barriers and the privatization of a largely state-owned and managed economy. Both of these radical changes in a very short period of time have produced a felt need for polling and market research activities. Suddenly it matters what potential voters and consumers think.

The emergence of polling in this environment is clearly a mixed blessing. The integration of such activities into the politics and economy of the United States has occurred over a period of six decades. The slowness of this process has been a benefit in the US. Although the basic scientific method of polling has been understood for some 60 years, actual opinion research remained largely an academic exercise for many years, largely because the data collection and analysis required so much time that the use of such data for political or journalistic purposes was quite limited. More recently, we see that the methods and the technologies have converged to make it possible, or rather probable, that polls can be conducted quickly and the results released within a few days.

"Opinion polling, a product of mature democracies and market economies, has parachuted into an emerging economy and democracy, which certainly does not have the communications infrastructure to support it, may not have the institutional independence necessary to manage it, and with few exceptions, does not have the critical facility within the media and universities to place the results in perspective."

In a sense, the relative slowness of the introduction of survey research has allowed American society to accommodate itself to it. Over the decades, academic departments of universities, public opinion research organizations, government and other groups have all taken an interest in studying survey methodology, in disseminating information about appropriate and inappropriate uses of polls, and in developing guidelines and codes of ethics. Journalists have been educated and alerted to the benefits of polls as news, and also their pitfalls and the manipulative uses to which they can be put. Academic researchers and political and public policy analysts have uncovered and discussed the many ways in which polls, in particular the intersection of polling and journalism, put pressures on policy makers and the policy making process. It is not that there is perfection in this enterprise, not by a long shot, but there are corrective mechanisms in place, inside and outside of the polling business. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Argentina, or in many of the other places around the world where polling is erupting.

In sum, the challenges to polling in emerging democracies, at least as represented by Argentina, can be stated as follows: Opinion polling, a product of mature democracies and market economies, has parachuted into an emerging economy and democracy, which certainly does not have the communications infrastructure to support it, may not have the institutional independence necessary to manage it, and with a few exceptions, does not have the critical facility within the media and universities to place the results in perspective.

Communications Infrastructure

Of primary importance is the issue of the communications infrastructure as it affects polling methodology. We take for granted in the US that well over 90% or so of US households have a telephone (although in some areas it is considerably below that) and that most addresses are also easily and cheaply (if somewhat slowly) reached by mail. Therefore, methodologically sound survey research through the mail and by telephone is possible. Random samples of almost any population can be obtained or produced by creative combinations of telephone records and the US Census or
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Argentina is by no means unique in this regard. Recent reports about polling in Mexico, Nicaragua, the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China indicate similar problems caused by the lack of infrastructures that are taken for granted in the US.

Institutional Dependence

While the infrastructure problems get to the issue of quality control, institutional independence relates more to the purposes of polling and the uses to which results are put. This means simply that there may be a lack of independence among the various economic, political and journalistic actors in the society. Americans take for granted the independence, not only of our three branches of government, but also of the independence of journalism from institutionalized politics, and the independence of these two sectors from the polling establishment. We also expect a certain “transparency” in the way the sectors operate, both internally and in their relations with each other. We all know that the independence of these various actors and the transparency of their activities is less in “actuality” than it is in theory, but nonetheless, we assume separation of goals and cultures.

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governments and public opinion to its goals. This sort of perception, which seems fairly farfetched to a citizen of the United States, is not uncommon among many people in Argentina. The notion of independence among major institutions is not well developed in theory or in practice there. Such collaborations (or collusions) do apparently take place in Argentina; newspapers are closely tied to the political structure, with news coverage often shading into advocacy. In addition, stories often surface about journalists taking money “under the table” from politicians or party officials, and of reporters being forced to write stories about questionable polls because the publisher/po리 politician requires it.

An example of such a “too close for comfort” relationship is provided by a front page article run last fall in La Nacion of Buenos Aires, perhaps the most prestigious paper in Argentina. The story provided the results of a poll done by the ruling political party’s official pollster, showing that the president, Carlos Menem, would win the next presidential contest without need for a runoff election.

I have no evidence that this poll was in any way compromised methodologically. Indeed, early in my visit in Argentina I interviewed the director of this polling firm, and I am sure that the poll was as methodologically sound as possible given the context. However, the issue is the lack of independence of the various institutions and actors involved in politics, polling and the media.

Ulises Beltrán Ugarte has discussed the ideological tug-of-war in which the Mexican polls were caught during that country’s last presidential election. It seems to me that journalism and polling are very much integrated into that same game in Argentina.

Journalistic Naiveté and Carelessness

Another point is the journalistic naiveté or carelessness in writing about poll data. We have this problem in the US, even after years of educational efforts, courses in precision journalism in the schools, and collaboration between media organizations, polling firms, and universities. Journalists in other countries may be even less prepared to deal adequately with polls. The major sin is to treat all polls equally, regardless of methodological sophistication or validity. In fact, many reports of polls in Argentine newspapers neglect to include basic data about how polls are conducted, so it is impossible to know basic issues of sampling — even sample size.

Role of Universities as Critics

In the US, we have a long tradition of studying public opinion and the polling process from critical and scholarly perspectives. In the former sense, social science faculty of universities, and those they train, often act as gadflies to point out the deficits of the polling business as practiced and also work to improve it through the study of methodology. In the latter sense, they study the role of public opinion polling in various processes important to the functioning of democracies.

Such interests seem not to exist to a great extent in Argentine university and intellectual circles. The social sciences are firmly rooted in critical and qualitative studies, with quantitative research of most kinds, particularly North American applications, being largely ignored and disparaged. Thus, the universities, by completely rejecting the validity of the method, have removed themselves from the business of improving its practice. Ulises Beltrán Ugarte said something very similar in a discussion recently about the last Mexican presidential elections, “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.”

One might add that until the social science faculties begin to provide serious training for public opinion researchers, little improvement can be expected in the methods used to gather public opinion data or in its interpretation.

There is an inherent danger in trying to apply blindly ideologies and/or methodologies developed in the US to any other culture or society. The history and organization of Argentine society are quite different from those of the US. Polling has developed in the US and in the democracies of Western Europe with the assumptions of freedom of expression, free and open elections, relative transparency of government and political processes, economic and political stability, and advanced communication infrastructures. If these conditions can be seen as goals, then Argentina has made remarkable progress toward them, in fits and starts, in a rather short period of time.

It remains to be seen, however, whether polling will help or hinder the process. If used predominately for manipulative purposes, it will only reinforce what appears to be a thorough cynicism in the society concerning the honesty and efficacy of its political institutions. On the other hand, the potential exists for polling to help strengthen significantly the democratic institutions that are currently being developed.

Endnotes:

1 See articles on these topics in The Public Perspective, Vol. 1, No. 4; Vol. 3, No. 5; Vol. 4, No. 4; Vol. 5, No. 5; and Vol. 6, Nos. 1, 2 and 3.
3 Ibid, p. 16.

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