

Argentina: Polling in an Emerging Democracy

By J. David Kennamer

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.

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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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various consumer data bases. Results can be generalized within reasonable margins of error to definable populations, with weaknesses clearly understood. Reasonably accurate population statistics exist for purposes of evaluation of final samples and weighting of results if necessary.

Such a situation simply does not exist in Argentina, and I suspect in many other places as well. According to the 1995 *World Almanac*, there is a phone for every seven persons in Argentina. This can be compared to a phone for every 1.3 persons in the United States, for every 2.5 persons in Spain, for every eight persons in Mexico and for every ten persons in Brazil. Obtaining a phone in Argentina requires weeks and hundreds of dollars. With the recent privatization of the telephone system, this has been reduced from several years and thousands of dollars. Also, it seems quite clear that there is an extreme upper-income bias in telephone ownership. Phones are still seen as luxuries and it is difficult to place calls to some rural areas. While costs and availability are improving, the lack of adequate phone penetration will continue for many years to come. This has obvious implications for research done by telephone.

Conducting surveys through the mail is also problematic. According to one Argentine researcher, roughly 70% of letters actually reach their destinations. If everyone selected for a survey returned a questionnaire that had been sent them, only 70% of those would get back to the researchers, for a *maximum*

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possible response rate of 49%.

The nature of the postal system does not encourage response. One does not put letters out for the mail carrier to pick up or walk them to the corner mail box. One has to take them to a branch of the post office and stand in line. Because of the lethargy of the mail, most businesses deliver their bills by private courier, and most bills are paid by standing in line at banks. In addition, both the telephone and mails are much more expensive than in the US.

It seemed from my interviews with people in the business of marketing and public opinion that the main technique is some form of a door-to-door quota sample, with quotas based on perceived economic class of neighborhoods. Interestingly, Argentine pollsters have noted that with this method, as opposed to the US, there might be a bias towards lower-income people. Upper-income people live behind walls with servants and are nearly impossible to reach. Lower-income people are often unemployed or underemployed and don't have much else to do, so that when a researcher comes by, they are more than happy to comply.

Further, because much of the country is very underpopulated, with more than half of the population concentrated in Buenos Aires and perhaps five other cities, and with polling done largely face to face, pollsters regularly work only in greater Buenos Aires, or in Buenos Aires and the other five cities. Rarely, if ever, is the whole country polled. The expense and time of this, given the need to use door-to-door interviewing, would be prohibitive. This basic limitation on the generalizability of the results is often not clear from press accounts. This limitation can perhaps be ignored for marketing research, given the distribution of consumers and incomes in the country, but probably not for political or social issues. Particularly important is the fact that voting is mandatory in Argentina. Thus, any survey with such clear regional or class biases may be of limited generalizability.

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.¹ The result can be solutions that are certainly creative but perhaps indefensible from a methodological perspective.

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.

This is much less the case in Argentina and in many other countries, especially those accustomed to centuries of rule by small, tightly connected elites, whether military or civilian.

What this means is that the polling technology may not be used simply to measure opinion, but more likely to manipulate it. In question-and-answer sessions I had with various groups while in Argentina, I was often hit with the question of media manipulation, sometimes with an anti-US twist to it. Many Latin Americans feel that CNN, for example, takes its marching orders every morning from the White House, and is therefore an arm of US foreign policy, with the goal of manipulating foreign

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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/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.² 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 ef-

forts, 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."³ 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, if 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.

² Ulises Beltrán Ugarte, "A New Electoral Order—And A New Role For Election Polling," *The Public Perspective*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 12-16.

³ *Ibid*, p. 16.



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