

# Argentina: A Second Look

By Norman Webb

J. David Kenamer's cautious evaluation of the polling scene in Argentina does that country less than justice (see "Argentina: Polling in an Emerging Democracy," *Public Perspective*, Vol. 6 #6, pp. 62 - 64). My response to his article, simply put, is that maintaining good professional standards does not always mean following US customs.

Outside the US, and especially in Europe and Britain, a polling company can work for a political party and simultaneously publish regularly polls in the media without experiencing any conflict of interest or problems of professional ethics, which are just as properly observed and strictly policed there as anywhere. During my years at British Gallup, we supplied research for the Conservative Party, sold our data to the Labour Party, and on a few occasions worked for the Liberals. Our integrity as the exclusive supplier of opinion polls to the important British newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, was never in question. There is an important cultural and political difference to be noted. In Europe (and Britain in particular), candidates' expenses are so severely limited as to be laughable in American terms. No "hired gun" research is possible, which may go a long way to explain the absence of survey companies which can prosper by working solely for candidates - very different from the case in the US.

Kenamer goes on to lament the absence of an academic presence in Argentina and other nations which would be able to pass judgement on the performance of the footslogging practitioners. I can live with that, and so can Unilever, Proctor and Gamble, General Motors, and other multinational corporations who commission research with our profession, after due consideration, on a scale that leaves academic researchers gasping with envy. These multinationals

recognize the expertise of our profession.

Along these lines, practicing pollsters in other nations do not work in a professional vacuum. In Argentina, for example, there are 15 members of ESOMAR, and 12 research companies are approved by ESOMAR and subscribe to its code of professional practice. Though European based, ESOMAR is far and away the most important and powerful organization in our field. There are also eight members of WAPOR in Argentina, as well as six companies belonging to international chains. These

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companies benefit from frequent contact with colleagues around the world and the adoption of international standards and techniques.

Gallup de la Argentina, through their membership of Gallup International, asked me as an expert to help them in the important pre-electoral surveys for the presidential elections (May 1995) that David Kenamer refers to in his article. As he so rightly says, most commercial research in that country is confined to greater Buenos Aires and some important cities, covering 70% of the population. My job was to work with them to produce a truly national sample to discover voting intention. Costs were an important consideration, so I built this in as a stratifying factor.

Our sample was truly national, with the qualification that while the urban coverage was complete, we omitted only the remotest rural areas. At sampling

points there was an explicit random walk procedure with rules for selection of an individual in each household, but with a sex and age quota requirement on the interviewer's assignment (I do not have the knee-jerk reaction to the word "quota" that many Americans have—to me it depends upon how it is used and the circumstances). Thus, the interviewer had no discretion and work could be checked.

This survey, published in the press, indicated President Menem would win without a second ballot, and its accuracy was confirmed on election day.

Kenamer also refers to the lack of adequate telephone coverage in Argentina as well as various deficiencies in the nation's postal system. Practitioners know well that currently, except in the Anglophone countries, Western Europe, some Arab states and Hong Kong, personal interviewing remains the only way to reach the general population. Argentina is not deficient in the basic statistics needed to plan such surveys.

To sum up, the corrective mechanisms in Argentina, and other such nations, lie more in contacts and collaboration through international associations and the acceptance of their standards than through the independent academic community. This situation reverses Gresham's law—the good is driving out the bad. Fears expressed by outside observers have more to do with their perceptions than the actual practice of survey research in these nations.



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