

# *From the Field* A Week in the Life of an Exit Pollster

*By Warren J. Mitofsky*

*Monday, November 1, 1999.* It's six days to Mexico's first-ever presidential primary and, as in elections everywhere, chaos rules. Nothing is completely ready. Everyone is working feverishly.

Nearing midnight, the lights still burned bright at Consulta headquarters when I drove in from the airport last night. Daniel and his team were still working on their computer programs. The interviewers had been hired for the exit poll, but we still were not sure who was going to pay for it.

No one was particularly excited about the state of affairs except Roy. He is my partner in Mexico in this venture. Roy is always excited. Everyone else just went about their jobs with determination, diligence and bloodshot eyes.

There were things I wanted to do without disrupting the work in progress. I knew that the programmers' work had not been checked yet. For some reason it is the last thing to happen. As I was the source of the computer models that will be used to estimate the election result, I thought this was a task I would do. Roy was busy trying to get a contract.

You may wonder why this last fairly obvious detail had not been settled, but it is not the "Mexican way." Ever since the 1994 election Roy and I have been working for Televisa, the largest television broadcaster in Mexico. We had met with several of its executives months ago and described the national primary that Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had fashioned to select its presidential candidate for the 2000 election. We had urged them to make a timely decision about conducting an exit poll. It was like a bad movie that I had seen before, and I knew what was going to happen. Nothing.

Decisions are not something that get made quickly here. My guess is that Televisa hoped they would not have to spend the large sums it will take to do projections for this national presidential primary. If it isn't such a good news story they can save the money. But the polls showed a close race, and there was no way to avoid it. The number one news organization in the country could not fail to cover the first-ever national presidential primary, even if one candidate eventually wins by a wide margin.

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As things worked out, the Chamber for Radio and Television decided to step in and organize the projection part of the news coverage. All radio and television belongs to the Chamber here in Mexico, so it was natural that they should take over this role. I had hoped to keep matters simple and work for just one broadcaster—Televisa—but simplicity is not what I have come to expect. The Chamber devised a scheme that included Televisa, Consulta and the Chamber's pollster, Cesar Ortega. In order to get the other Mexican television network, Azteca, to join the consortium they had to let Azteca's pollster, GAUS, have part of the action, too.

Roy and I started on the computer systems, the models and the field organization a long time ago. We hired and trained almost 6,000 interviewers to survey voters as they exit their polling places, found a telephone center to collect all the returns as they are reported, and increased the computer capacity from what is usually required for smaller elections. We guessed that Televisa would eventually buy into the exit poll, and we knew the decision would be made at the last minute. Roy and I, on the other hand, could never get ready in time if we waited until then to start preparing. The biggest gamble in exit polling is not the election night projection; it is getting a contract.

This primary is not like a US presidential primary. It is more like electing the US House of Representatives. Candidates will try to win the most votes in each of 300 districts, and the candidate who wins the most districts will be the PRI nominee for president. Contrary to what has been written in the newspapers, it does not take a majority of the vote to win a district or a majority of the districts to win the election. All it takes is a plurality in a district to win it and a plurality of districts to win the election.

Having a primary is an important change. Since 1929 when the PRI took over running the country, the outgoing president had given the tap on the shoulder, *dedazo*, the Mexicans call it, to his party's successor. Then the party faithful diligently backed the president's selection, and on Election Day the people dutifully cast their votes. And one way or the other the PRI candidate won the election. That was the past. When Ernesto Zedillo took office in 1994, he said he would not designate his party's next candidate. The party ultimately decided on a primary after it had proved successful in a handful of states that had had elections for governor. The people seemed to like it, and, for the most part, the candidates selected through the primary got elected.

The goal of the 1999 primary is credibility, credibility for the PRI and its next presidential candidate. I am not sure it will be achieved. There is nothing in the process that is unfair or slanted to one of the candidates as far as I can tell. But that is not the whole story. There is the perception that the process is rigged to favor Francisco Labastida, the former secretary of the interior. He is believed to be the favorite of President Zedillo, even though the President

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has done nothing overt to encourage that view. But enough party and government officials are working openly for Labastida to lend the campaign all the trappings of a coronation. The PRI's past election practices have also encouraged the view that Labastida is the preferred candidate. Whatever has been done to clean up the electoral process is still not widely recognized. It will take a long time to forget the past.

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*November 2, Tuesday.* Here at Consulta election central we have a late morning break to celebrate the Day of the Dead. It is a centuries-old Mexican holiday on which people remember their dead by taking food and such to the cemeteries. As macabre as it sounds, it is a cheerful holiday, meant to poke fun at the Grim Reaper. We all gather on the top floor under a beautiful clear sky and eat a special, very light sugared bread that is baked for the occasion. Then back to work.

Today is the day I will review the computations first-hand. Being in different countries and using different languages during the creation of these programs has added an element of mystery to the process. Through the wonders of e-mail I had sent modeling information to Roy from New York. Roy had then asked a few questions in his rapidly improving English, which is better than my nonexistent Spanish. After I answered, Roy explained it to Daniel, who in turn wrote the specs for the computer programs. I am always amazed when the information on the computer screen matches what I said. Today I will find out.

But first there are the mandatory interruptions. Can I review the statements we will use on election night for each of a variety of scenarios? Can I please get someone to translate so Daniel and I can discuss the task at hand? Can I please see the election system on my computer so I can become familiar with its operation? And, of course, no day would be complete without lunch around 3. I am starving!

*November 3<sup>rd</sup>, Wednesday.* Can we please wait until 11 o'clock on election night to make our projection? That is my first phone call this morning. The radio stations have some boring government program they are required to air at 10, and the Chamber would like to delay the announcement until the radio broadcasters can join the television broadcasters. Holding a projection seems like a strange request. In the US we

announce what we know as soon as the polls close. Why spend all this money and then hold the projection? It is not as though I will be more certain of my projection later.

The front-page poll story in this morning's *Reforma* shows Labastida's lead at 11 points. *El Universal* shows it at 18 points. Either of those margins will give Labastida a landslide victory. If the projection is held until 11, the vote count may be known before we can announce it. The compromise is that we release our projection at 9:50. We will certainly know the winner by then. Getting the number of districts correct will take more time.

Two hours later the release time is back to 11 o'clock. Apparently Televisa wants to go on the air at 10 and have their pundits talk about the issues. They view this as a build-up to the big moment when the Chamber calls the winner at 11. There is nothing they can possibly say that has not been said repeatedly over the last four months of the campaign. Furthermore, the media have all been proclaiming Labastida way ahead in the polls. My guess is that by 11 the only ones who will have their radio and television sets on will be die-hard political junkies. The rest of Mexico will either be in a stupor from the government hour on radio or from the talking heads on television.

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Roy has let me in on a little secret. He has been doing a lot of polling, interviewing 600 people every two days for more than a month. These are in-person interviews all over the country, and they provide probably the best data anyone has on what is likely to happen. Among all Mexicans the race was close, but among likely voters the margin has been steadily widening. This week the margin has grown by about two percentage points a day. Labastida is heading for a landslide. My guess is he will win somewhere between 230 and 250 districts. Maybe more.

Oh, yes! I have finished checking the exit poll calculations. No problem, once I corrected the possibility of dividing by zero in one of the computations. A computer gets very confused when one tries to divide by zero. More work on the other computations tomorrow.

*November 4<sup>th</sup>, Thursday.* Today we are going to see Televisa.

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On Sunday, the PRI is also holding a primary to pick the mayoral candidate for the Federal District. Maybe we can get an agreement from Televisa for the national exit poll and an exit poll for the Federal District. The Chamber is not interested in these. The polls close at 6 o'clock in the Federal District, and we know that Azteca is doing a rather large exit poll there—300 precincts. That is more than I have used in some national elections in the US. Our Federal District exit poll is small by comparison, only 60 precincts, but it will be more than enough to project the outcome. It would be good for Televisa to broadcast the results of the city's primary. They will let us know later today.

Roy just walked in with a big smile. Televisa has bought into both exit polls, and they want us to make a projection of the Federal District mayor's race. At least we will not be out of pocket for any part of the cost of putting this together. We still do not have anything in writing, though. It is the "Mexican way," Roy says.

*November 5<sup>th</sup>, Friday.* The newspapers are full of stories questioning the validity and fairness of the primary process. It is the same argument that has been going on for some time. Labastida is ahead. Labastida is perceived to be the President's choice. Ergo, the President or his consorts have fixed the election so Labastida will win. The *New York Times* had a strong article two days ago that did everything but disqualify Labastida from running. The English-language *News* here in Mexico advertises a similar article on page one. The concern is that there will be a split in the PRI and the other major candidate, Roberto Madrazo, will bolt the party if he does not win. So far, he says he will not. Losing credibility is not what the party wants.

I knocked off the remaining computations first thing this morning. I want to be sure it is out of the way so I can turn my attention to other things. For one thing, I want a chart that is not in the computer to track the districts won by each candidate. I would also like to outline potential news stories that might come out of the exit poll. It helps to have thought these things through ahead of time. If I leave it until Election Day I will never have the time to go through the data carefully enough to find all the good stories.

After the last check of the computations Daniel tells me, in his best English and with two fingers held only an inch apart, that he will have everything fixed in 20 minutes. I mean, what's the problem? All that is wrong now is that he was dividing something by 100 when he should not have been.

I didn't get much done today. I have not seen the analytical data from the survey, so I have not written anything. I am sure there will be plenty of last minute things to do tomorrow. And

it's a good bet there will still be tasks to complete on Sunday while the election is in progress.

*November 6<sup>th</sup>, Saturday.* I arrive about 10:30, and only the programmers are in. Maybe the others are recovering their strength. Ah, but Daniel's here. Maybe I can get him to fix that programming glitch.

But first, he wants to show me where we will work tomorrow. We will use the facilities of a data processing company called NCS. They have 270 work stations, each with a computer and a telephone. That is more than enough for what we are doing. The vote returns from over 5,000 polling places and the detailed exit poll results for about 360 polling places will be reported to us at NCS's facility. The vote returns require only one phone call for each polling place from the person we hired to go there and get the vote tally.

Taking an exit poll is more complicated. Each voter in our sample will answer about a dozen questions that the interviewer will ask out loud; literacy is not high enough here to let the voter fill out the questionnaire him or herself, as we do in the US and Russia. Then the interviewer will turn the ballot over and hand it to the voter. On the back of the questionnaire is a replica of the ballot for the voter to mark just as it was marked in the polling place. After completing it, the voter will fold it and put it in a box the interviewer carries. Several times during the day the interviewer will give the ballots to a supervisor, who will then call in the responses of each voter to each question.

Response rates are pretty good in Mexico, much better than in the US. We average over 80% here, compared to about 60% in the US when I worked for CBS. I hear that it is even worse now in the US. Cultural reasons probably account for some of the difference, but I believe the biggest factor is the length of the questionnaire. In the US they ask twice as many questions. We are getting around the problem here by having five different short questionnaires. Only a few of the questions are the same on all questionnaires. The number of people interviewed in an exit poll is so large that we will still have good sized samples answering each questionnaire.

Well, it is about 8 o'clock now, and Daniel has finally fixed that last problem. I guess 20 minutes takes more time for him than me. I am going to get a good night's sleep.

*November 7<sup>th</sup>, Sunday.* Today is the big day. Marcello drives me to NCS, but first he has to vote. I want to go with him. His polling place is in a garage on a quiet residential street. No exit poll here. There is a table with a pile of ballots for the national presidential primary and a separate ballot for the Federal District contest for mayor. The ballots are bound in

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pads, and each ballot is numbered. When they tear off a ballot, the stub and the ballot each have the same number. Marcello marks his ballots in the privacy of a booth, folds and deposits them in separate ballot boxes. Before they gave him the ballots he had to display his voter registration card. It has his picture, name, address and a physical description. It also has his thumbprint, signature and a magnetic strip.

When we get outside I point out to Marcello that someone could have recorded his name and the serial number of his ballot while he was in the voting booth. He is taken aback. “No one would do that,” he said. I try to point out that they could, and then they would know how he voted.

The first exit poll results from the Federal District come in before noon. They show a closer race for mayor than we were led to believe by the pre-election polls.

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Vote returns from our sample polling places start to trickle in by early afternoon. The first exit poll results, presumably from the Federal District and maybe other large cities, show Labastida leading by a dozen points. But as more returns come in the lead widens to between 25 and 30 points. A landslide in vote and in districts is unfolding. Roy’s polls showing the lead widening daily were right.

When I look again just before poll closing time, the exit polls are nearing completion. We have to write a release for Televisa. They will announce the winner in the Federal District at 6 when the polls close. Even though competition with Azteca is fierce, Televisa will not rush on the air the moment the polls close to announce a winner. Azteca does. They say Roberto Silva, the former ambassador to the US who is running against Roberto Campa in the mayoral primary, will win 51% to 40%. Our projection is a little narrower, 50% to 42%. As the night progresses the margin starts shrinking. The gods want to see if we will blink and retract our call. We hold firm, and the margin opens up again.

I leave Televisa right after their broadcast, planning to return in time for their next feed at 9 o’clock. I plan to stay for the five-minute report on the Federal District and then go back to NCS to make the presidential projection with Roy for the Chamber. When I get back to NCS there are plenty of vote

returns from our sample polling places. By 7:30 it’s clear that we can already project the number of seats, give or take a few. There is no way the announcement can wait until 11 o’clock. I start calling people asking them to urge the Chamber to move the time up earlier. They do. The Chamber will broadcast at 9:50, over two hours from now!

I return to Televisa for the rest of the night. We have an inconvenient cubbyhole behind the set. Once I get in there it is impossible to get out while they are on the air. The set has been expanded, so there is now a big round table where half a dozen people can sit and comment on different aspects of the primary. More talking heads, I think. But it turns out to be a pretty good broadcast.

My place is in the cubbyhole. My few words of Spanish will not sustain me for a roundtable. During a past election they tried sitting a translator next to me. First he translated the question for me, and then I replied in English—it was a disaster. I don’t hear that well and the translator was whispering to me, so I kept saying “What?”

I try to get what I can out of the broadcast. I send a few notes, which need to be translated, trying to shed light on some issues. The panelists speculate on the turnout, so I send my estimate: just over 10,000,000. They talk about Madrazo voters deserting the PRI for the presidential election. I give them the results of the exit poll on that question showing most Madrazo voters will vote for Labastida in the general election.

The Chamber announcement is at 9:55. Roy and I make the call. The pictures of the Chamber on television remind me of Russia. They start with a close-up of all the Chamber members sitting in the audience, all in dark suits, somber expressions, looking attentively at the dais. From the dais the president of the Chamber reads the announcement: Labastida, 270 districts, Madrazo, 22 districts, Bartlett, 8 and Roque, nothing. The story I had given the *New York Times* had Labastida at 272. Our estimate had varied between 270 and 275, depending on when in the night we looked at it.

All in all, it is a successful broadcast. The projections and the analysis are a big hit, and all the Televisa executives are pleased. I’m pleased too.

(And, by the way, we still haven’t been fully paid.)

